

Somewhere Beautiful

--Gary Marks

Marksland Entertainment c 2009

Chapter 1

I found myself alone with Van Gough. It was almost closing time at the Muse D'Orsay. I was staring at a painting of swirling stars bathed in a world of very dark blue. The stars seemed to be reaching right out of the painting, searching for sanity in an insane world, when suddenly I heard the vibration of a kick drum that sounded like cards being shuffled -- I mean the drummer's foot could move that fast! It had to be "Slayer."

I turned around to find the source. Ruth was watching me staring like a zombie at the swirling madness on the wall. She had her headphones on, leaning casually against the entranceway to the exhibit, standing there with what I thought might be a slight grin on her face.

I know "Ruth" is usually the name of an old person, but her parents were old, which could explain it. She also didn't look like a Ruth. So I thought about changing her name in the book but I decided that wouldn't be right. I want to try to be real, and exact, as far as my memory allows, or something might get lost that's essential.

I loved the curvy way she was standing there because it created a mood. It gave me time to stare at her face for a moment without looking like I was transfixed. What I saw was not unlike one of the stunningly beautiful faces you might see walking down a busy street in Paris, or created by Rodin, yet she also possessed blue eyes that sparkled like flashlights, which you might find more frequently when walking down The Avenue of the Stars in L.A. She had on a pair of American jeans that were rolled up to the top of her ankles, with a thin gold ankle bracelet dangling from her right foot. She wore an unbuttoned blue silk shirt over a pink tee-shirt over a yellow undershirt that barely peaked out above the neckline. The layered colors were reminiscent of a Monet painting from the early nineteen hundreds. She pushed the I-Pod off of her ears and said, "Hey Mayor."

Now this was amazing really, because even though my real name was Mayor, no one called me that back home. Even my parents called me some nickname unless they were really pissed at me. Everyone else I hung out with either called me "Mayo," which of course is usually an abbreviation for mayonnaise but kind of sounds like "Mayor" with just the right amount of complete disrespect for the office, or, friends and mailmen and others that knew my name just said, "Hi," to avoid trying to figure out what they should call me, which made me feel kind of invisible. In fact, that was a pretty common feeling I had growing up. But not today. Not now.

Because when Ruth said, "Hey Mayor," it sounded like the name "Mayor" was about the coolest name on the planet. It sounded like, "Hey Jake." Or "Hey there, Johnny J."

But what did I reply? I just said, "Hi." Because, "Hi, Ruth." would have sounded like I was saying hi to my aunt. And, "Ruthy," wasn't much better.

“Closing time,” she said. “Let’s get out of here.” We had decided to meet on the fourth floor of this most famous museum because we were both vacationing in France, which was pretty cool. And she loved this place, especially the fourth floor, because she liked impressionism. I thought it was ironic, since obviously “impressionism” is what first dates like this were all about.

My parents brought me to Paris as a “just before you go to college,” bonding thing. Of course, being a teenager in Paris, I wasn’t seeing too much of them. But then again, by them feeling okay about that, it *was* a bonding thing, for me anyway.

Ruth was in Paris because her parents were living in an apartment near the Eiffel Tower for a month. We all met by chance at a restaurant on her second to last night there, and, well, you know, two American families on vacation, both from California, one with a teenage boy, one with a teenage girl, in a cozy local restaurant where the meal takes about three hours. It seemed like a good time to brush up on our English, which we weren’t hearing much of lately. So we merged our tables together.

There wasn’t much to do but talk in between courses. I mean, it’s not like the waiter comes over and sings or anything. They’re all pretty stiff. All business. Ruth and I were seated next to each other – which we both knew was planned by the Board of Parents. One glass of wine led to another and suddenly everyone was liking each other. I thought she was going to be very straight and stuck up because she was wearing “out to dinner in Paris with your parents” clothes. I didn’t know how totally cool she was until we started talking about music and politics and school while waiting for the “entre,” which in France means the appetizer. We had a lot in common – she liked heavy metal but she wasn’t a total insane freak about it. She liked lots of the ancient heroes too, like Springsteen and The Stones. She honored the roots. I liked that. And politics was like, *please!* And school was like, let’s not go there either. But she did tell me she had been accepted to Wesleyan, which was a very good school so she had a brain. I had been accepted to the University of Berkeley. Our destinies were no longer in our hands, which neither of us were all that happy about. But it was also kind of a secret relief. We didn’t need to decide any more what school to go to. At some point my heart started racing whenever she said something, no matter what it was, and it really wasn’t the wine. It was her. She asked me if I wanted to hang out the next day and I was pretty impressed with myself. Although thinking about it later that night, gauging the competition what other choices did she really have? She could have chosen to hang out with some French people and pretend she understood what they were saying, or chosen to hang out with her parents for the millionth day in a row, or hang out with me.

We decided to meet at the Muse D’Orsay the following night at closing time, because that was the only time it was free of charge to get in. We both liked things that were free more than our parents did. Spending money gave them some kind of odd peace of mind. They had made the grade as rich consumers and now they could even leave us some if their estate plan was cunning enough. She told me to meet her on the fourth floor and now I knew why – Monet, Van Gough. Renoir, Sisley. Interesting company.

We skipped out of there just as they were locking up, turning only briefly to see the outstretched arms of a small statue by Camille Claudel – it was a bronze woman with a pleading face reaching out to the open hand of a bronze man who was being pulled away by his other hand, guided away or stolen away, by some kind of demonic looking angel (it could have been his wife). An entire movie seemed to be unfolding in that small piece -- probably the smallest statue in the whole museum. I was a bit stunned even just walking by it. We had our own unfolding movie tonight. Hopefully it wouldn't end like that.

We started making our way by foot down café filled streets, except neither of us said where we were going, or knew, or cared. Sometimes there's somewhere you want to go, but other times nowhere can be better than somewhere. And this was a perfect time for it. Everyone's allowed to wander in Paris.

Chapter 2

First of all, thanks. You have to really like to read books to get all the way to “Chapter 2” without some kind of mysterious murder happening by now, or some sex scene that involves infidelity, or a depraved act. I respect that you’re willing to suspend judgment and take your time. Most people don’t seem to read books for pleasure any more. Too many people just read Chapter 1, and then if something weird hasn’t gotten them totally hooked they just read the ending and think they can figure out the rest backwards. They read what they have to – for class or for work, plus maybe they glance quickly at the Internet news once or twice a day to see if someone like Michael Jackson died. They like the martyring and crucifixion to be detailed out with as much gore as possible, with lots of close up pictures, captioned with as few words as possible. This is how business people and housewives and loafing wannabe guitar players sitting around their apartment in front of a TV get to rebel against all the “information” they were forced to read in school. School still hasn’t changed that much since the days when all those businessmen were kids. It still sucks. They grew up and forgot to do something about it.

Anyway, we all know what they’re trying to do. It’s basically an inoculation that’s force-injected upon the young while their docile innocent parents pretend they don’t remember. We spend our youth having our arms and minds twisted and shaped into a particular cultural way of thinking. And we go with the charade so we can get accepted into college, so we can join the heroic march towards paying our electric bills and owning a house, so that we can get to feel trapped and bored and go through a mid-life crisis that everyone laughs at and reassuringly whispers, “it’s just a phase,” while they slap our back, until finally we fall back asleep and do some estate planning to make it all seem worthwhile – “at least the kids . . .” is the beginning of the sentence that makes it all seem worthwhile. We become “Americans!” And the French become French. And the Chinese fall prey into believing they are “Chinese,” and their culture pushes the “Chinese” ad on every open channel. We’re forced to believe there’s an unbridgeable fearful difference between us. (Until or unless we marry each other, and we find out there’s no difference at all. Everyone’s kind of a jerk.) It’s ridiculous, really.

But what’s the alternative? Living completely off the grid, under a tree in the rainforest? Not accepting any culture as one’s own, not using local currency as your personal totem, not getting all hung up trying to create and psychoanalyze some personal identity? Is there really some other way to live? I was looking for “a middle path,” as Buddha would have said if he were in my situation -- about to go to college and hanging out with a beautiful girl in Paris.

I rationalized everything, as everyone except Buddha does; I figured I would check out UC Berkeley and see if it had something truly different to offer, something that wasn’t just about living attached to a leash, although I was under no illusion – I was born with the “docile dog” gene along with most people. It’s an easier way to live. But I think that gene mutated when I turned sixteen.

Back to what I was saying, I appreciate that you're an avid reader. Probably also a bit of a dreamer like me, because here you are on Chapter 2, and I can tell you that reading this book will not get you one step closer to getting a high school or college degree. Because they will never have this book be mandatory reading at any school on this planet, unless it's run by my younger sister, who adores me and everything I do for reasons I totally don't understand. I really should be nicer to her.

She turned fifteen last summer. The day before her birthday I overheard her talking to her snotty friend, planning out her party. They were huddled secretly in her slobby all pink poster-filled room across the hallway from mine. The friend was suddenly talking about me, which I at first only heard as a muffled word that sounded like "Myr", as I was sock sliding towards the B-room to pee out half a carton of OJ, which I drank too fast after a sweaty game of basketball. The echoey monologue got louder and I definitely heard my name again so it made me stop and eavesdrop without feeling guilty, because all of a sudden this was an educational experience -- one of self discovery, rather than just sneaking in an ear full of gossip about who was coming to a fifteen year old girl's birthday party. I was always open for some constructive feedback.

The friend said, "I mean, he's kind of cute but he's mostly a dork. He's always listening to sappy crappy music, like Avril Lavigne, and playing sports and things like that. No tattoos. I love guys with tattoos." And my sister says, "Nah, he's okay."

What a Saint! I told you I really should be nicer to her. Plus, I had really never thought of myself as "kind of cute," so that was the one thing positive I took from the conversation. I looked in the bathroom mirror and tried to see what "kind of cute" looked like. I smiled. I tried to make a "kind of cute" frown, and a *just hanging around not trying to make a face* "kind of cute" face. But all I saw was that after five days of not looking in the mirror I probably needed a shave. It's hard for me to remember to shave.

Back to our walk in Paris, the thing that most intrigued me about Ruth that night as we tripped around searching for the perfect café was her almost iridescent blue eyes. I know I mentioned them before, but every time she looked at me they really were startling. We walked in an unconscious zigzag pattern towards the Seine. I felt like a wild winding river flowing around her solid calm energy. (I also found myself thinking she must be wearing colored contacts. But I found out later, those were her real eyes!)

The other visual thing I liked about her was that her body was thin but not anorexic looking like some leggy model in some women's magazine. In fact, she could eat more than me and drink more than me and never seemed to care either way. I liked that. She was confident about herself, comfortable with who she was. So unlike me in those ways since I was in the throws of a mid-life crisis that came about twenty years early.

Imagine the odds of a seventeen and a half year old boy from L.A. meeting a seventeen and a half year old girl from a town near San Francisco by having their parents randomly meet in a restaurant in Paris, France, and then falling for each other walking without rhyme or reason towards the Seine one night, with their fingers sometimes brushing across the other's fingers, just by chance of course, causing some electrical charge in each of them but not admitting it to each other. What are the odds?

By the time we got back to her parent's hotel it was about 2 a.m. She had called them on her cell three hours before to tell them we were just walking around discussing school, and they had her number and hadn't called her, so we assumed they were asleep by now. She didn't seem in any rush to go in. We kind of wandered away from the entrance, over to a corner that wasn't lit up, near a small garden of beautiful colored flowers, and I kissed her. She kissed me back, putting her hand around my neck, with her stomach against my stomach, until all my synapses decomposed. I found myself destroyed and completely alive all at the same time, right there, standing in an unlit spot on a Paris sidewalk. I didn't even know the name of the hotel, or the name of the street, or who owned the garden we were standing near. All I knew was that spot would always be somewhere important to me.

I decided it would be the first place I'd visit again someday, to remember what it was like to feel clear and cleaned out of all the junk the world tries to stuff into you. It was the very first place I felt like I owned in some way – not by the exchange of money, but it was mine because no one could take that purely personal transcendent moment away from me, even if the flowers in the garden died. Even if they built a skyscraper there in place of a four hundred year old building (which they would probably never do in Paris). But it wouldn't matter.

Ruth texted me the next day to meet her under the Eiffel Tower at 20:00 (eight that night). I texted back, "Sure." When I told my parents they kind of raised their eyebrows, like, "Really?" My sister gave me a smile and a thumbs up. I tried to downplay it and told them it was better than being bored hanging out with them all night in some quiet stuffy restaurant. But they were like, "Okay, uh huh." Overall, my parents are not terrible.

Chapter 3

Summer in Paris is a time of never ending sunsets. The sun starts to go down around nine, falls below the horizon around ten, but even then, the sky doesn't turn fully black until close to midnight. As I walked from the Toscardero to the Eiffel tower its criss-crossed iron beams were still bathed in bright sun. I saw her standing there near an entrance waiting for me. She was smiling a full smile, wearing a ruffled beige shirt that she might have bought that day in a Paris shop, with a faded black tee shirt visible from underneath that she'd definitely had for a while. Her face was as pale as alabaster, from the Anglo-French *albastre*, with twilight eyes.

She immediately took my hand and led me away from the crowds lined up in organized iron railed rows waiting for the small red elevator to take them to the top, until we found ourselves walking down a quiet street alone.

"I've been thinking about you," she said quite out of the blue, wiping her long ruffly beige sleeve across her forehead.

"Yeah?" I figured this was either going to be something very good or very bad.

"I decided you're not a dork."

"That's what my sister thinks too!"

"Well, then she's got good taste."

I said, "Thanks for the compliment. I'm glad I've yanked myself out of the land of dorks all the way up to okay."

She laughed. Then she pointed to a very old building – which in Europe means circa 1500's at least, and we walked towards it. When we came to the entrance we touched the cool rough stone wall and looked up at the darkened windows. No one lived there. I thought to myself, this is when you're supposed to kiss her, here in the cool darkness of this ancient place. I felt almost as if I were in a movie. So I didn't. Because I didn't want it to seem fake. I didn't want to follow someone else's script. But then she said something that made me drop all that because the feeling overwhelmed me. She said, "Let's live here!" She was joking of course, quoting Bill Murray's final line in "Groundhog Day," but it was almost as if she knew I knew the quote, and that it was one of my favorite movies. I'd seen it twenty times, as would any true Groundhog Day fan, repeating the experiences he repeated over and over again – over and over again.

I kissed her because I really wanted to, I had to. But it didn't stop there. We started touching each other everywhere. It was Paris, it was an empty street in a dark corner of antiquity. And we were in a city where no one would have cared anyway. Paris honors lovers.

It was another 2 a.m. night. As we walked back to her hotel the Eiffel tower looked like an illuminated gold space ship from the nineteenth century. It overwhelmed my senses and took up all my attention until our next kiss. She was leaving for home the next day. But she promised to text me from the airport. I believed her.

When I woke up the next morning something felt different.

I'd had girlfriends before. But I had always felt disconnected in some way, unsure about wanting to be considered their "boyfriend." It's such a responsibility having that kind of freakin' albatross around your neck.

So I would let things happen, or out of curiosity I pushed things to happen, but I always felt a bit like an observer, like I was watching a movie of me doing what I was supposed to do. My heart felt like a dark vault trying to find the thing that was supposed to go inside of it. And through no fault of whatever girl I was with, she didn't have that thing that got to me. She didn't know the combination. And I sure as heck didn't know it! But after a while, maybe a few weeks, maybe a few months, I just knew she wasn't supposed to be with me, even if she didn't know. I clearly knew, but most of the time I didn't care that I knew, I hung around anyway. Just because.

But now the vault door was wide open, too open, and my heart was out there flying around, roaming free, out of control. It wasn't just that I found the thing that was supposed to go in it. Everything was in it! It was overwhelming, and it was awesome, and it also hurt. I didn't like the "missing her" part, and the needing that came along with it. She hadn't called from the airport.

I felt a bit sick about that. But I made up reasons why

I started missing that feeling of calm almost bored disconnectedness from before I met her. It allowed me to feel nothing. Friends of mine take drugs to feel nothing. "Nothing" is a valuable commodity that is often paid for with shaking and desperate hands, and angry laughter. "Get me back to nothing," scream the life weary, the love stricken, and me sometimes.

Chapter 4

When I got back home the scene had changed around me. Nothing had really changed, of course. We'd only been in Europe about three weeks. But being in Paris (we also went to Dordogne and Venice) -- all these truly beautiful places -- made L.A. seem like an overgrown box of gaudy metal and stupid looking cars, all vibrating with dead energy beneath a vaguely orange sky. It was definitely gross here, even though there were always a lot of fun things to do on the weekend.

Also, my friends now seemed a bit clueless. They seemed kind of immature and odd. They were like a characterization of someone they were trying too hard to be like. I felt bad for them because I knew that I had been acting that same way before I left on the trip, before I met her. I had been lost, just like they were. And I hated life quite a bit, just like they did, because I was bored, with school and parents, and all the stress about the future, and scared about everything I couldn't control, and feeling pissed about all of the above, and the politicians, and the war(s). But I wasn't allowed to actually scream at the teachers or the government. (Scream at George W. Bush, see where that gets you. Did you ever scream at a toilet bowl?) . . . It was the typical junior-senior year angst. What else was new? *Except I didn't feel the angst anymore!*

Because back when I was still in Paris she called me the next day from back home. She wanted to call me from *Aéroport Paris-Charles de Gaulle*, but she didn't want to talk to me with her parents around. They would definitely have gotten weirded out since we'd just met. She didn't think I'd care one way or another about waiting a day to hear her voice. She had no clue about the effect she was having on me, and I sure wasn't going to tell her! OMG, that would have blown the whole thing right there.

Now we were talking or at least texting every night. I was being tres cool about it. Not exposing anything intense going on in my head. So she kept calling. Things were looking up. But I guess if you look up too much without blinking you can go blind from looking directly at the sun. I felt like I was falling from a great height with no wings. Icarus, the moron. Hearts without a parachute. The Challenger disaster. My emotions were going insane.

Two weekends after we got home I persuaded my parents to let me fly to San Francisco to see her. I wasn't going to let them stop me. I just needed the money to get there. What I didn't tell them was that Ruthy's parents were going to be out of town visiting her Uncle who owned a chateau up in the wine country. She was an only child, so she usually went with them on weekend jaunts like this. But she told them it sounded boring and that she would be happier staying home alone. What she didn't tell them was that I was flying into SFO about two hours after they sipped their first Zinfandel. We were both going to be home alone. So it wasn't exactly a lie.

As the plane reached peak altitude on this, my first solo plane flight ever, I settled back and looked out the window while being serenaded by U2 on my I-Pod. I felt so adult-like, flying by

myself to visit my girlfriend. "It's a Beautiful Day," dum de, dum dum, Bono screaming out those words. The sunlight glazed off the triple layered acrylic window. You could see the micro-scratches absorbing the sun's rays. I remember seeing a live U2 concert on You Tube – they let a thousand doves out into the sky above the stadium during this last chorus. . . .None of them crashed to earth. I took comfort in that, since being thirty thousand feet up was kind of spooky when you thought about it. How smart are airplane mechanics anyway? Were there any Harvard airplane mechanics? I was afraid to ask.

It wasn't all that long ago that I was playing baseball with my father in the field behind my public school. He wanted me to be a good athlete. And a good student. Hence, a scholarship. Hence, he saves an insane amount of money. Hence, he retires earlier.

But I think he saw it coming -- I was always asking him crazy questions and spending too much time in a semi-catatonic state lying on my bed with headphones on listening to music he hated. I can pinpoint the exact night my dad gave up on me becoming being a white Hank Aaron -- I asked him if I could skip going to a night game with him at Dodger Stadium because there was a Mike Doughty concert at El Rey Theater. The most memorable moment that night for me was not a home run hit by Manny Ramirez, but when some white kid who looked like he was from USC asked Mike Doughty if he wore the same shirt for every show, because he had seen him three nights in a row in the same shirt. Mike said, "I have three shirts just like this, so I'm diligent in my laundry habits." Just before slamming into a great version of "27 Jennifers," he added with a wink, "Also, I shop at J. Crew. Don't be a hater." The crowd went wild. I hope I get a chance to take Ruthy to see him some day.

The plane began to dip slightly, then it emitted a slightly different sound. I heard and felt the wheels release and we swooped down into SFO like a big slick bird who'd just spotted a very tasty meal. Maybe that was my projection, as they say in the sequestered rooms of the psychologists' buildings dotting the 'hoods of Westwood. Because it's the way I felt, for sure! My eyes were starving to see her. I was famished from not having her around.

She picked me up in her mom's gray Lexus. So I slipped my Mike Doughty CD in and played the "White Lexus" song:

Please show me how to live
Please show me how to have a day
I don't wanna wake up now
Why do I have to wake up, anyway?

. . . When your white Lexus comes
around the way
Idling in the long driveway
Try to feel nothing on command
When your white Lexus comes.

I kept looking at her face as she drove us back to her house in Mill Valley. She looked less exotic now, away from Paris, without the Eiffel tower looming above her like an enormous halo. She looked less remote and mysterious, more solid. Her clothes were more plain, although still layered. And a gold bracelet jangled from her wrist as she shifted gears out of the airport onto the freeway. That made me feel a bit sick to my stomach because I didn't like thinking of her as some rich girl. Her face was pale and smooth and finely featured. She listen to "White Lexus," but she didn't make a big deal of it. She wasn't some trying-too-hard characterization of a cool girlfriend – the stereotypical valentine I had fallen in with in the past. Dare I say it, she was more like my sister Darcy in many ways then like some Britney Spears version 2.3.

We crossed the dazzling Golden Gate, red as the inside of a blood orange, with the fog racing in from the sea, getting tangled in the cables. Then she sped down Highway 101 a few exits. We were on the outskirts of a small town, then passed a Whole Foods with a parking lot too small to handle the crowds, turned up into the hills on a narrow road, and pulled into her house – a big, wooden, three storey barn-like structure with glass windows everywhere, in various shapes and sizes. The house was hidden deep in the woods, private, quiet. We hadn't said much after a brief hello because she kept the music turned up high on our ride and listened to the CD all the way through. That was fine with me. I felt comfortable listening to the sounds and checking out the sights as she drove, not having to make small talk.

When we hit the driveway she took the keys out with one quick twist and said, "Let's go. Leave your stuff in the car."

She quickly jumped out and began to run. I ran after her to the front door. By the time I got there she had already unlocked it and raced inside. I followed her in just in time to see her running up the stairs two steps at a time. I was laughing, curious, running up the stairs chasing her shadow. She ran into her room. It was filled with candles, and there were actual paintings on the wall, abstracts, rather than posters. There was a bowl of summer fruit on the dresser -- peaches, apricots, plums, green grapes. She smiled at me and slowly began to take off her clothes. Her shoes and socks at first, so I wasn't sure. . .but then she unbuttoned her shirt. She kissed me and threw my hat off my head onto the ground. Our bodies embraced and we fell with slow motion gracefulness onto her bed – soon summer came and I dreamed chaotic colored images as I merged into her silk white skin, blinded behind closed eyes, with light as bright as the sunbeams coruscating off the plane window just hours before.

The big light we have in our minds when something is suddenly shockingly frighteningly good was whirring around in me like a lighthouse searchlight, signaling to some lost Captain that land was near. This land, where all things became perfect mindlessness.

When we landed back onto the shore we were out of breath, giddy. Dazed. But we wanted to go out to sea again. We wanted to repeat the experience, of being lost and found and lost and found. For a long time.

Chapter 5

That night we decided to go into San Francisco. She had lots of friends she wanted me to meet, but I was not allowed to meet them this time, of course, because, I wasn't supposed to be here. I was invisible, as usual. But I didn't care *at all*. I didn't want to meet anyone or be around anyone but her. I didn't want anyone to see me but her. So flying around the city in her dad's green Jag seemed like a pretty good compromise as far as being invisible goes. It did cross my mind what their third car must have been. The car they took up North. I quickly imagined a Porsche or a Lamborghini, but they were not great choices for long trips. Probably something like a red Bentley convertible.

Back to reality. We went to a run-down club near 10th Street called, "Dango," and saw – well, mostly just heard, since the lighting was pretty non-existent, a band that sounded like a poor man's version of "Dimmu Borgir" during their "Death Cult Armageddon" phase. We left early to get drunk in a quieter, ever so slightly more romantic setting, not knowing how we were going to get home with both of us so completely liquidated.

She began driving very slowly at our usual 2 a.m. hour of departure, but when we got to Golden Gate Park near 19th Avenue she pulled onto a quiet street four zigzag turns from the main road.

"I'm too drunk to drive across the bridge right now. I need to sober up. If I smash up my dad's car it would be so very very over."

"I so know *dat*," I slurred, criminal-rap cool-dude -like. It was a bit over the top, but I was hoping she would realize how blitzed I was and forgive me. Certainly one thing one clear, I too was too out of it to drive.

"I only have one idea, not sure it will work, but"

"What's that?"

We parked in a very upscale neighborhood. The street was empty at this hours, no cars going by, no people anywhere. I wondered how far it would be to walk home from here.

"Come into the back with me," she said as she climbed over the seat. I saw her climbing over, brushing her leg up against me. I followed. Once I was sitting next to her the rest was just as natural as could be. Making love in the back seat can be very awkward, in case you haven't tried it. But it seemed like whenever Ruthy and I were together everything we did just fit perfectly. Everything was in sync. Including the timing. Because just when we returned to the front seat all tucked in, a police car drove by, stopped about ten feet ahead of us, and began to back up.

An officer got out of the car and shined his flashlight into the front of the car. Ruth waved and rolled down the window. “Just showing my friend how beautiful the neighborhood is,” she said.

“With your car lights off?” he said.

A real TV detective, he was. He was a burly guy for a cop, kind of too fat for a cop. No way he could chase down a fleet footed robber, or even me, if I were sober enough to run in a straight line, But I guess with stun guns and all these days you don’t need cops running under 4.6 any more.

“I just wanted to be in the moment with my boyfriend here,” she said. “We were just saying goodbye before we go off to college. . .in a few months.” She was speaking with perfect class and respect but realized she was beginning to ramble, so she stopped herself from saying more.

“Mmm hmm,” he said. Probably getting a bit horny himself. I figured he had to be reading between the lines. Hopefully that would also distract him from doing the breath-o-lyzer thing.

“Sorry,” she added, “we’ll just move on,” and started the motor.

“Dies he live around here?” he said to her. “Because otherwise, I’m afraid you’ll both have to come with me. Step out of the car!”. . .(Actually, that was poetic license. If he had said that, it would be a different kind of book. Instead we got lucky.)

All he really said was, “Okay, move on out.” He spoke more like Barney Fife than some dude from CSI.

She nodded and rolled up the window. He started waddling away.

She pulled away from the curb and drove past the squad car, its twirling blue light spinning shadows through our front window.

She waved at him, “Fuck you, Mr. Fatness,” she sang out. We cracked up laughing until we were shaking, coughing, losing our breath.

Off we flew down 19th Avenue heading towards the bridge.

“That’s better,” she said finally. “Now I’m all sobered up.”

Chapter 6

What was not spoken during any of those thirty six hours I was with her was what was going to happen two months later. Neither of us had the ability to change what was now written in stone – she was going to Wesleyan, smack dab in the middle of Middletown, Connecticut. And I was going to UC Berkeley, which ironically was less than an hour from her parent’s house. When she was home on a long school break would I stay in the Bay Area so I could see her, or go home to see my parents in L.A? We had no idea how this could work out, but one thing neither of us wanted to do was spoil even one second of our perilous, precious, wildly entertaining tryst.

Newsflash: Endings happen. We hugged goodbye at the airport, trying not too get too freaked about the separation. We promised to see each other soon. Maybe next weekend. Somehow. Somewhere. We still had two whole months before the unknown sun set upon us.

Back home with my parents and sister, it was almost sickening not to be with her. Which sucked. I would have loved to have erased the pain and just kept the memories of the joy, but that’s not the way love works, now is it? No pain, no gain. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love. . . well what’s the difference what cliché you try to rationalize about it? It still sucked.

I tired to pass the time hanging out with my once good friends who were now spending most of their time on Facebook. Andre Tresh was one such geeky friend quickly becoming one hundred percent cyber on me. He smoked cigarettes, and everything else too, but never once did I see him cough, and he could drink everyone under the table without the awful residuals that come with that kind of fun. He’d wake up fresh as a daisy. He credited these superhuman abilities to working out. I said, “How do you work out your lungs and stomach and brain in a gym?” To which he replied, “Fuck off, Mayo.” Andre wanted to be a doctor. It said so right on his Facebook page.

Another friend of mine played guitar in a band that was gigging every weekend in dank smelly clubs all over lovely downtown Los Angeles. His name was Chris Caverston. The band was called, “The Wonks.” They prided themselves on deep “philo-psycho-political” lyrics smattered with literary references, along with a smattering of werewolves, zombies, and dark gods that alluded to some bastardized version of Greek mythology. Chris wrote the music.

Andre and Chris were friends. Andre even did the lighting for some of The Wonks’ gigs, in places where there *was* lighting. Most of the gigs were under a bare light bulb or two. Lighting in those clubs was enhanced by the frequent lighting up of Zig Zags near the stage.

Soon after my plane ride to San Francisco hit the neighborhood news we all met at Chico's Mexican Taqueria for a beer and some free chips and salsa, and they grilled me (no pun intended) on the details. So after enough alcohol to un-pry my modesty (I think I also just didn't like the idea of them setting me up later for some "I told you so" ridicule if everything fell apart) I told them about this unreal thing that happened. I met a girl in PARIS, with the name of someone's grandmother, who wore clothes that were like Avril cast offs, who was funny and smart and drove me around in a green Jag, and when she took off her clothes she glowed like an angel. And her eyes were so luminescent they almost radioactive. I mean I played it up a bit. I turned her into a myth – just like they secretly wanted me to, but really didn't want me to. They were drooling, hands covering their eyes. Shaking their heads. They wanted what I had, and were becoming jealous and therefore sarcastic. They had to try to drag the myth down to earth so they could stomp all over it. It's the only alternative to not having it yourself.

When I got home I saw that Ruth had called my cell, which I'd left home on my bed. It was only ten so I called her back, still a little looped. I was hoping she missed me and wanted to sneak off somewhere this coming weekend. I went over to my computer. What was halfway between L.A. and San Francisco?

I Googled "halfway between LA and SF":

Shelly "who loves red wine anytime". says:

Madonna Inn is really romantic and cool in a retro sort of way. There are lots of places along highway 1.

Marilyn Monroe from Mexico. says:

Carmel

Gustie Wind Z. says:

Madonna Inn? Well not really. In fact, anything but the Madonna Inn - unless you two are aging swingers with a caveman fetish.

Eggyweggyed says:

take the 5 freeway; u will pass a HUGE cow pasture, make sure u don't roll down the windows. it smells pretty cruddy. i have stopped my car there quite often to take a picture of the cows w/ my hubby. passerbys will stare at u but just ignore them and keep on snapping those pics!! Nice place! I love cows!

I took some mental notes: No Madonna Inn. No cow pastures. Maybe Carmel.

When she answered the phone her voice seemed subdued.

“Hey!” I chirped, trying not to sound happier than a chirp.

“I really like you, Mayor. I mean I *really* like you.”

Uh oh, I thought. She had a boyfriend all this time.

Or maybe she met someone at the airport after she dropped me off.

Or. . . .

“But my parents found out about us and what happened last weekend. And I’m like so skunked. I’m so screwed. Docked for the rest of the summer. D.O.A.”

“Wow, how did they find out?”

“Neighbors. The fucking Neighborhood Watch. These goons live up the street from us that are like once a year friends of my mom and dad’s. I think they’re big time religious nuts, dedicated to keeping me a virgin. You know, they buy me things like Muslim veils for Christmas. Turns out my mom told them to keep an eye on me while they were gone, so they must have bought a fucking Hubble telescope for the occasion.”

“We have to do something! Maybe I could call your parents and apologize?”

“Call who?”

“Your mom and dad? I’m good with parents!”

“Hello, cuckoo dude! Mr. Innocent! You think you can like get on the horn and pull a Zack Ephron? I appreciate the insane gesture, but they would lure you up here to Mill Valley telling you everything’s cool and then kill you. You want to be the dead guy in a B- movie?”

“Ok, ok, so,” I began fidgeting with some of the non-functioning buttons on my cell phone, which I did when I got frustrated or nervous. “How am I going to see you again.”

“Billion dollar question.”

There was silence, for too long.

Then: “Oh shit,” she whispered, “gotta go, the guards are coming.”

She hung up. I was left alone to figure out what just happened, and how we could work our way out of this. There had to be a way.

I watched some tube to calm myself. All bad, as always. I flicked channels every second or two: images of a murder, a rape, woman hitting man, police chase, court scene, man hitting woman, bomb going off, a kiss interrupted by the guy being stabbed. That last one was all I could take. Got sleepy. Turned off tube with the soft rubbery push of the red power button. Turned on music with the other remote. Marilyn Manson. Anger, screaming, jarring. Just the right fit. Got all revved up. Couldn't sleep. So I decided to try to do some homework, long ignored. I mean, after you get into your "first choice" who the hell cares about senior year homework anymore? Ruthy was my first choice now. She was completely filling up every synapse and muscle. I didn't want to get up the next morning. Why? Why walk? Why eat? Why get toasted with a bunch of goonhead friends ready to laugh their fucking heads off at my pain.

I fantasized about turning back the clock, changing cultures, to a place where there are pre-arranged marriages. I would hang out with the guys in the rice fields all day then go back to the hut and eat fish. What was so fucking weird or stupid about that? Compared to this?

Chapter 7

I was now officially pining, according to the online Webster's dictionary:

1 : to lose vigor, health, or flesh (as through grief).

2 : to yearn intensely and persistently especially for something unattainable.

Ruthy and I still talked, and texted, but we were walled off by Parent Prison. Her parents were all over every excuse she could think of to get away, and she wasn't about to just blow them off and run away. They were paying for college. She wasn't about to do anything purely stupid because deep within that grungy wild brain of hers was a very smart and very pragmatic and organized person who had a goal, had a life to lead, unlike yours truly.

Plus, her parents weren't particularly bad or unfair as parents go, when you stop and think about it. I mean, first she lied to them, then snuck a boy into their house while they were gone who porked her for like two straight days, all this just two months before the boy was very likely never going to see her again. And, you know, parents will be parents. It's not like they were going to say to her, "Ya know, he's a good kid. I mean, you met in Paris, so we understand. It's such a romantic place. Go ahead and fly to L.A. and shack up in a motel for a week with this wonderful young man of yours and *get it out of your system*. In fact, have you ever been to the Madonna Inn, Ruth? It's halfway between her and LA."

Because that would have been so totally fine with me!

But no, parents will be parents. And if I were a parent, and it's not apparent I ever will be, I'd probably have worked her over pretty good. I'd have threatened to kill me. In fact, if I were that rich the threat might have come from a family attorney or something. I can be pretty good at seeing both sides of things and getting down with it.

So I half expected this when she called me one night about two weeks before school started and told me.

"We just got off on the wrong foot."

"Yeah."

"But we sure had fun while it lasted."

"Yeah."

"And we can stay friends, right? Are you on Facebook?"

"No, and I don't plan to be," I said.

“Are you mad?”

“Me? Yeah, I am. I hate Facebook for some reason, but I just can’t explain it.”

“Oh.”

“Listen Ruthy, have a great time in school. Maybe during the Christmas break we. . . “

“You too, Mayor. UC Berkeley will be a blast. You’ll meet some cool people there.”

“I am so dead sure.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

And that’s the way it ended, with everything being okay, but not okay; because no one was supposed to say it wasn’t okay – that definitely wouldn’t have been okay, because nothing could change what wasn’t okay.

Chapter 8

But see, that's just not me. That was not the way I was brought up. My dad told me he hates quitters. He hates Dodger fans that leave in the 7th inning to beat the traffic. So I was used to fighting through the quitting and sleeping forever feeling that you get whenever everything isn't working out. I wasn't going to let things end. And there's something else that's just not me, I was finding out – it was not me to go to college and forget about Ruth. In fact, it was not me to even want to go to college. Because if I went I wouldn't want to quit. But I wasn't sure that was the life road I wanted to go down. Nobody'd ever asked me what I thought about college. It was only which college, never a choice of no college. But I was restless, had always felt restless. And I didn't want to just walk into a little black mouse trap with no way out once I was in there. What price cheese?

I didn't want a poor imitation of a life. I didn't want a poor imitation of what I'd had with her in the short time we knew each other. I had been shut down and invisible for too long. I had gotten drunk and stoned and watched TV, hypnotized by holding the button down and letting the channels change without even stopping to hear or see anything more than a kaleidoscope of images flicking by, a corrupt and clueless culture coruscating by in rapid motion, because the whole thing was a senseless disaster. TV, life, love. Things where highs lead to lows, and lows get violent, but with faked murders, and fake love - what the hell were all these things they put on TV really trying to say? That life is all just one big fake? They even faked reality TV I bet. Reality seems to imitate TV these days instead of visa versa.

Anyway, it dawned on me one night as I hung out with Andre and Chris for the last time until we all shoved off to a new life at college, that UC Berkeley was also a fake. No fakier than any other school. Not trying to dis the Golden Bears. But let's face it, the whole thing was a set up, to push me into their game, to get me to become one of them. Instead of one of me.

But I knew I was never going to become one of them. I just didn't have it in me, even with my best effort. I was a natural outcast. A stranger to normalcy. A cause waiting to happen. And then it happened: One drunken stoned out moment in time, there, as Andre and Chris and I stumbled around Venice Beach, and then wandered down to the boardwalk amongst the day old litter and the street lamps that reflected off of the ocean. Andre took out the hugest thickest joint ever rolled in the western hemisphere, unless Jamaica is in the western hemisphere -- what he called "The Giant Killer" – it was a triple pun, since there was some wrestle mania dude called, "Andre, The Giant Killer," then there was the obvious fact that the spliff in question was giant in size, and of course marijuana was called "the deadly weed" – killer of innocent men, women and children everywhere back in the lovely fifties when whatever they said in the movie newsreels was true.

And then there was the fact that we all had these giant problems that needed slaying, and the deadly weed was without a doubt the only way to wipe them away like rain off a windshield and

replace them with something a lot sillier, like a windshield filled with eyeballs begging to drive, or a wind filled shield of doom replaced by a night of knights. . . all stoned out and ready to slay . . .something.

Feeling the smoke expand ever so whitely in my lungs, and believing (on pure faith) that in just seconds something unbelievable and virtually unprecedented would replace my morose pity party, and, yes, YES, here it was, coming now, a sudden image of Andre's hair sparkling in the lamplight, like an aura of stars, like cosmic dandruff, seemingly twinkling right there in his jet back curly mop, with the ocean crackling its wave-landings loudly in the background. I think someone must have amplified it while we were inhaling.

"Stars," I mumbled, squinting at his hair.

"Nebula," Andre screamed at the top of his lungs with his arms aloft, smiling like "The Wizard" in "August Rush."

"Nebraska!" said Chris, playing off of nebula in a rural kind of way, but mostly hearing new music in his head, per usual whenever he was in an altered state, and not paying a lot of attention to us. "Alaska," he then followed this with. . . Springsteen followed by Sarah the Moose Palin? This is why he left writing lyrics to the drummer.

At this moment in time Ruth was settling in at Wesleyan, since her orientation started earlier than mine. She was a light year removed from me. Maybe seeing me as her Paris fling, a graduation present before settling down to college and a job and marriage and children. I was fading like a star on a new day.

Back on Venice beach I rolled around on the sand with two wasted brethren until we all looked stunningly pig-like. Damp sand hanging off of our clothes like mud. In fact, we pretended we were rolling in mud. We oinked and grunted at each other for a while, pushing each other over, rolling on top of each other, making each other wheeze with laughter, with sand getting in our mouths. "Oxygen," Chris begged, the composition he'd been drinking in from the airwaves was now dehydrated, lost forever, running away from three lost madmen at the speed of sound. Sand was gathering on his tongue like wet cement. I believe, "oxygen" meant "water" in his world.

And then, as I lay there on the beach looking up at a single twinkling star that peeked weakly through the smog-filled atmosphere of the L.A. basin, winking at me from deep space, maybe a hundred million light years away, fresh as a daisy from a hundred million year journey only to land right into the retina of my eyes, it occurred to me there was a small chance that it had come all this way just to send me this one message, this one real thought filtering through all else, that could change my life on the spot forever –Ruth rhymed with – truth. Ruth, truth. Right? Because she was the only thing in my life that wasn't a fake. So maybe, *just maybe* -- my head was scrambling to unscramble this cryptic message from the light of the star –

I heard a mumbly hum similar to the one in the monolith scene in the old classic, “2001 Space Odyssey.”

My mind, which no longer resembled the mind I once knew, it had reassembled itself into something more lit up, more alive. I was no longer a Neanderthal following another Neanderthal’s butt down some dirt road into an ambush. I had touched a star! I was stricken with consciousness!

Suddenly, the cause – my cause – had appeared, bright as a lighthouse beacon, as clear as the Eiffel Tower from Pont de Grenelle, flashing at the strike of midnight. Her, there. I had to go. . . . Not to Paris. Not to the street where we first kissed. I had to get on a plane to Connecticut . . . I had to see her, tomorrow!

I had no idea what we would do after that. Or if she would even want to see me. But if I didn’t go I would never find out. I had to follow the only direction that was clear to me. My mind compass pointed due east. (Or *extremely* west given this round earth we were rolling around on.)

There was no middle path that got me to Middletown. This was a rocket launch, right into the heart of my life.

Chapter 9

My parents were none too happy with my decision. To be clear, they told me I was insane. The problem with this argument was that I agreed. They had no response to that other than to offer the name of a therapist in the city. "I'm not getting on a plane once a week to see a therapist," I told them. "I'll be three thousand miles away."

But here's the truth beyond the cultural definition of insanity. No one could say for sure if it would ultimately be a disaster for me to do this or not. Some other plan could turn out worse, or better. Even if I joined the march to UC Berkeley. My revelation this morning was: it was just my parents' job to play the odds. Play it safe. Not look at the individual in front of them, but work the stats. I was a number in a kind of actuarial table. Not just my parents' actuarial table, but my teachers, the media, the government, they all knew the odds, and all told me what the plan should be. Statistically this is what works out most often. But the question was, who was I beyond the stats, what did I really want, what was that star trying to tell me when my mind was unlocked from the game, and, most importantly, why wasn't I the one making the plan?

My piggy bank was emptied, my bags were packed, my I-Pod was fully loaded, my cell phone was all charged up, this was a brand new start. I had about \$5,000 saved up from various odd jobs and birthday and Christmas gifts from relatives. They usually had no idea what to buy me so they shoved twenty bucks in an envelope with something scribbled on it -- Happy, whatever, and what do they call you these days? "Mayhem?" Yuk, yuk, yuk!!!!!! Love Old Uncle Rusty.

Budget yourself, I told myself. It was the voice of my father, clear as day -- my financially savvy father -- whispering in my head -- trying to instill a sense of fiscal discipline into the quivering brain of a love smitten raving maniac. Nice try, dad.

I decided not to let Ruthy know I was coming. And I saved money by booking a flight a week in advance. I didn't think waiting a week would matter. I didn't want to screw her up during registration and that first crucial week of classes. I figured I'd wait and screw her up after that. A fair compromise. I was playing my own odds that she wouldn't have found some guy to take my place by then.

I arrived in Middletown on a perfect fall day with bright red trees standing next to evergreen trees, standing next to yellow-haloed trees. The air was cool and fresh and seemed to have a mildly inebriating affect. Leaves were swirled upon the ground, mixing together like a splashes of paint. Tens of thousands of leaves were raked into nice big piles on the side of the road. These were the leaves having plans made for them. Swept aside by man. But then a gust of wind freed them, lifting the top layer of leaves into the air. They skittered down the road, hip hopping freely with each new gust.

I found a nice inn near the campus, called, "The Inn." Either a tribute to understatement or totally uncreative. I proudly gave the receptionist some cash to pay for one night. Ever the pessimist. I

felt like a spy on an impossible mission. I was given a room key, quickly threw my stuff on the perfectly made quilted bed, looked at my face in mirror of the small ultra clean and shiny white bathroom, decided there was nothing I could do, my face wasn't changeable in any positive way, hair would be messed up by the time I got to the campus even if I were to comb it now, so whatever, and I immediately made my way towards the University gate.

I entered Wesleyan on a street ironically called, "High Street." My heart was beating like a hummingbird's wings. I was completely in outer space mentally -- still trying to decipher that star. Was it laughing at me now, telling me it was all a big joke? I ran around asking students if they knew the whereabouts of Ruth Delaney, but it was a pretty big school. Two thousand kids. And she was a newcomer. I found the admissions office but they wanted to know why I was here, and who I was. *Well, that's what I'm trying to find out!*

Back out onto High Street I went. I followed cars. Sometimes running after one that looked like it might stop for me. Someone walking out of Parking lot "A" overheard me asking a student if they, by some crazy chance, knew where I could find Ruth Delaney. Just as I slumped dejectedly away from another shoulder shrugging group of girls who apologized for not knowing who Ruth was, and secretly wondering why a girl their age would be named Ruth, I felt a tap on my arm. "You're looking for Ruth Delaney?"

The words were spoken by a blonde girl with a sweet Midwestern face, fresh as the autumn air, wearing a winter overcoat, carrying the required amount of books under her arm.

"Yes, you know her?"

"I'm in one of her classes. I think she's at Olin right now."

"Olin?"

"Olin Memorial Library." She pointed with her free hand to a building in the middle of campus.

"Thank you!" *I kissed her – mwaa.* "Thank you!"

"But. . ." I thought I heard her mumble. But I had no time for buts, I ran full speed towards the library.

The building jiggled up and down larger and larger as I ran towards it. Finally I dashed through the glass doors of Olin Memorial, asking Mr. Olin to wish me luck. A picture of him hung on the wall near the entrance. "Were you ever in love, Mr. Olin? In love with more than just knowledge and words and education? Were you ever so in love that your body left the planet and all you wanted to do was sing and shine and beg for mercy because your heart was about to crash into itself with joy and fear and sadness and a euphoria that not even the best drug in the universe could transport you to? You understand what I'm saying, Mr. Olin?"

I stood near the reference files and began to look around amongst the book aisles and the round study tables and the . . . then at a corner table, I saw her. She was sitting with some other person. A guy person, actually. A guy person who was looking over her shoulder, not so subtly breathing in the smell of her hair and neck. Which I admit I had never really tried myself. But I made a note for next time, if there would be a next time. . . .

She looked over in my direction suddenly, for no particular reason. Maybe a ghost cleared its throat and whispered in her ear. She did a double take just like you see in the movies, and stood up like she'd seen an assassin. "Oh my God!" she said too loudly for being in a library.

The guy seemed to be asking her what was going on, but she pushed his hand back and came over to me. "What in the world are you doing here, Mayor?"

"You," was all I could manage.

"Berkeley?"

"No."

"*What?*"

"You."

"Oh my God," she said again. Her fingers went into her mouth. Her face looked a bit contorted.

"Him?" I asked.

"Yes, well . . ." she said quietly. Not proud, but no hint of shame.

I nodded, heart crashing back down to earth. SLAM! Staped to the floor.

Silence. Stillness. More crashing. Doom was landing in my throat now. Couldn't speak. Had to go, but couldn't move yet.

"But you," she said, "Mayor, I couldn't get you out of my mind. He's going to have to go away."

The electricity of the world suddenly came back on. Lights hummed back on, flickering at first. I found myself crawling back into my body. Took me a few thousand synapses firing to really even hear her. But then it stuck. They'd dug a nice new pathway called 'maybe' in my brain.

Chapter 10

She grabbed her books and whispered something to the guy at her table. Must have been something like, “My brother’s here, surprise visit, gotta go, I’ll call ya,” because he didn’t protest. He just sat back down to read his text book. He glanced up at me once as she bounced over to me. But I didn’t wave or smile or anything because “who was I?”

I took her arm and we walked amongst the trippy bright colors of autumn to The Inn. We walked up the old red carpet to the second floor and I found the key. “Entree vous,” I said. “Welcome to Paris, Connecticut.”

It was crazy. We were like rabid dogs. We dove onto the bed and devoured each other. I caressed and kissed every part of her cloud-essenced skin, resting in her arms, smelling her hair and neck. Noted.

I decided I wanted to become the perfect lover. I wanted to become the perfect person. I wanted to give to her like she so naturally was able to give to me. Except we were getting hungry and I didn’t have any food to offer. So we tripped over to the café down the street where all these students were pretending to study but were really looking for someone to shag or fall in love with (depending on whether they were male or female). Even the giggly girls in glasses hiding in the corners were looking around for “the one,” but they would never admit it.

Pizza and beer was the main course, followed by chocolate cake. This truly was Paris, Connecticut. Five stars for the deep dish pizza with olives and peppercinos.

Once we got back in to The Inn I just had to make love to her again. I mean, this was a once in a lifetime moment.

I was finally spent, smiling at the walls and windows and the unlit fire place. I got up, feeling a new electrical charge of energy and reached for my I-Pod. I had to turn her onto this new CD I’d been listening to on the plane. But she stopped me.

“Tell me, Mayor,” she was resting with her arm under her head, a blanket covering her up to her chin, “what are you expecting from all this?”

“All what?” I pretended not to understand.

“This!” she said quietly. “You basically went AWOL from school, now you’re here with me. But I can’t just be here in this room with you, like a still life picture, for the rest of eternity. Time moves objects around you know, even me! So what now? For you, I mean.”

“Because you’re going back to school tomorrow?”

“Of course!” She seemed perplexed at the question.

“Well, I haven’t thought any further than this night,” I said honestly.

“Shock of shocks,” she teased, closing her eyes in a condescending way. “But what are you *thinking*, dude? Doesn’t it flip you out that you should be registering tomorrow? Don’t you have any idea how badly this could screw up your life? What are you expecting to happen? You want me to drop out too, so we can travel around the world on our parents’ credit cards, maybe go back to Paris where you can dance for me at sunset without anyone thinking we’re raving lunatics?”

“That sounds great!”

“But for how long. Mayor? I mean, I am so glad you’re here. I’m not trying to sound like a snarling hag of a wife, but, don’t you ever dream of something more for yourself than just tripping around? UC Berkeley is a great. . . .”

I interrupted, “You think I wasn’t dreaming of something more when I came here? Ruthy, let’s inspect that thought for our own clarification, okay? Just check into reality as we know it today. Let’s say I graduate UC Berkeley, *with honors*, and I get a job as president of a bank or something, and I bring home lots of money, enough money to support you so we can have a flock of babies. That is reality as we know it, and our parents know it? Right? But is that the meaning of life? Is that all? Or is there something deeper that all that time and work leaves on the road along the way, like autumn leaves piled up on the side of the road. Who cares about fucking leaves when I have to get to class, or go to work, catch a train, a plane, and they march us all around in there net until someone pays for our funeral and we never even tried.”

I looked at her face, her eyebrows were furrowed. I wasn’t done.

“You don’t like my present game plan of running off into the sunset with you to see what’s there? Okay, so instead you marry Arnold back there in the library, or whatever his name is. And he gets a better job than me. But you have a degree too! Right? So then you both work at jobs that eat up most of your time, but they’re challenging and don’t kill your soul entirely. Let’s put that into the equation. And then, of course, you have kids, and they go to day care so you can keep working, so you can buy a house with more rooms so you can have more kids. . . . And they grow up, and sometimes they make sense to you, and sometimes they don’t. And sometimes they get sick and you have to take care of them, but by the time they are in high school they don’t give a damn what you did for them when they were eight, because now they are not a part of you anymore, and they’re out of control. Like we are tonight! Your kids are out of your control. . . . And sometimes they fuck their boyfriends in their little pink rooms while their dolls watch. And sometimes they have to lie to you or they’ll hurt your feelings because you don’t get it. But in the end, it all works out, they get over the high school hormone thing, they go to college, get good jobs, and they get married, right? . . . And now, praise the lord, you have grandkids! And Arnold back at the library, well, he became very successful and left you a nice

estate when he died, so you don't have to worry about anything, even though you were totally capable of supporting yourself anyway. But it was a nice gesture. That was his meaning to life, to leave an estate. . . . And so he's dead now and you're living in a condo in Boca, limping around on your little fat legs cooking soup from a can for dinner, hoping and praying that your kids will bring the grandkids to see you for Christmas. And that's the meaning of life to you now? Is that it? Is that what you think is a sane plan? A sane life? A good use of your future time? And it's worth spending your present time getting there?"

"You know the really sick thing about you, Mayor?" She paused to shake her head and gather herself. But tears were forming in her deep blue eyes. "*You make sense to me,*" she screamed. "You do! You're like a computer virus, eating away at the software in my brain and rearranging all the data to fit your code. And I'm beginning to hate that about you. Because you're screwing up what I thought was a perfectly good plan."

"If it was so perfect why couldn't you get me out of your head? If everything was so good, I guess you could go back to Arnold tomorrow and tell him you and your brother and you had a really good time, but that he's your guy."

"His name was Eric! I mean, *is* Eric."

"Well, make up your mind. Is he *was*, or is he *is* again?"

She laughed. "Was, I think. I mean he was never really is, but, look, I'm still not even sure about 'the new is' who was a was until now. I don't know if this is just a sweet dream or something that's supposed to be a part of my permanent reality. All your crazy ideas. . . ."

"Well let's find out. Because, guess what I found out, Ruthy? Reality as we know it doesn't work!"

She put her hands over her eyes and laid back on the bed. The wheels were turning.

I laid down beside her, "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For giving you a choice," I said.

She nodded.

More wheels turning. Then she let out a scream, of anger, of confusion, that startled me. Then she whispered, "Okay, let's try it your way. But what reality does work, Mayor? Make up a plan if you want to, but you're going to have to come up with something that makes sense to me on some level. You can't just tear down everything that is and leave me with nothing to hold on to in it's place. If everything we were going after is a lie, what's the truth?"

Chapter 11

The next morning found us rising slowly from our dreams in room 4. She was skipping biology class this morning, because now she wasn't even sure she should be in biology class, or any class. Her life was a topsy turvey tug of war mess between logic and, well, me.

Logic still told her to stay in school and follow the fate set up for her long ago by her parents and the social rules of engagement. But logic also revealed other things she rarely considered until now: her dad hated work. Her mom seemed frustrated all the time - with him, with herself. Yes, they went to Paris for their twentieth anniversary, but Ruth wasn't so sure they were happy about most of those twenty years together. They were celebrating because that too was part of the way things were done. In Mill Valley the friends and neighbor folk approved of the trip – ah Paris! Twentieth? Perfect! So romantic. They applauded the love birds as they sped off in a stretch limo to the airport. None of it made sense, it was merely logical.

She was also appalled to realize, tearily, wearily, eerily, that she was just as much a waif and a reject as I was. She questioned everything, always had. The difference between us was that she questioned but then obeyed. But not any more, maybe.

She turned her mirror on me, since she had no answers for herself. “Mayor, isn't there *anything* you've ever wanted to be? Something you'd be willing to dedicate yourself to, besides me?”

I was brushing my teeth at that moment, wondering where we could go for breakfast.

“A dentist,” I spit out the toothpaste and ran my cupped hands under the water. “I don't know why, it just came to me.”

“I'm serious! I mean if you could do anything in the world you dreamed of, what would you do?”

Long silence as I wiped my face on The Inn's nice white towel. Fresh. Smell of bleach and perfume. I could get used to this lifestyle if I had endless money to fund it.

I came back to the main room and sat beside her on the unmade bed.

She said, “You've told me you were great at math and liked science. Wouldn't you like to do something exciting some day, like build rockets?” Her eyes lit up with excitement for me. I wished I could feel about rockets and science at that moment the way she did.

“Maiming and destruction.”

“What?” She looked confused, the light in her eyes dimming.

“That’s all it would lead to -- maiming and destruction. They don’t just use rocket technology to catapult some dude up to Mars. They use it to make bombs and missiles too. Why should I add to all that?”

“Okay,” she said, “You love sports. You said you are a good basketball player. How about joining the UC Berkeley basketball team?”

“More maiming and destruction,” I said.

“What?”

“Ruth, they would kill me! Without intentionally committing homicide they would trample me like a bug, slam me down, step on my face. I would be eaten for breakfast – speaking of which . . .”

“Oh come on, why the sudden lack of confidence?”

“It’s not a lack of confidence, it’s a lack of about eight inches and fifty pounds of muscle. A five foot seven, one hundred forty pound college basketball player is cannon fodder.”

“Muggsy Bogues!” she shot back.

“*What?* . . . Wow, I’m like so impressed!”

She smiled. “You’re a lot taller than five foot three. That’s how tall Muggsy was playing in the NBA!”

“ I am really, REALLY impressed! You’re – you know what?” I sat closer to her, “You’re amazing. Have I ever told you that before?”

“Several times,” she laughed. “All for completely depraved reasons.”

“Even your sense of humor is so damn great!” I was gushing.

“Hey, how about you?” I asked. “What do you want to do?”

She smiled sheepishly and shrugged her shoulders.

“I know. You have such a great sense of humor. How about becoming a stand up comic!”

“As opposed to you, lover boy being a comic when you’re laying down?”

“See? See how fucking funny you are?” I pushed her over and bull rushed her. I sat on top of her, trying to hold her arms down with one hand and began to tickle her mercilessly with the other.

“Stop, please, I’m serious! I hate tickling.”

I stopped. I wanted her to trust me.

“How about this, then?” I kissed her and began to touch her warm creamy skin. Forget breakfast. She was my food. She was my air. She was what I wanted to do. But love was never enough, was it? Not in this life.

Chapter 12

“So okay, I have a profession for you to consider,” I said. We were scarfing down eggs and toast at the café.

“Go on, weirdo.”

“I’m not kidding about this. You are not like the other Wesleyan-tonians, no. They are not your people! They are . . .the other people. . . And yet, somehow you are comfortable in both worlds, right? You understand both dimensions. Theirs, and yours, and even mine. And you’re great at . . .inspiring people! You *are*! And you have a good heart. So I think, I took a bite of egg to add a bit of drama, “you ought to be a psychologist!”

“A *psych* . . .what are you, a college version of the Wizard of Oz handing out jobs now?”

“Well, that’s what I could have said about your suggestions this morning! Rocket scientist?”

“Touché. But forget it, okay? But I just think, at some point, I mean, we can’t just click our heels and go back to Kansas. Ain’t no Kansas in this dimension. Toto’s dead.”

Of course, officially Ruth Delaney was still a matriculating student at Wesleyan University. Her parents were paying big bucks by the semester and knew nothing about her skipping classes, or questioning the whole process, or re-assessing the relevance it had to her life *as only she could define it*.

This was about more than just some puppy love affair with a rebel kid going nowhere. Only the second half of the sentence was true. But more importantly, I had struck a nerve in her. Reality no longer made sense when defined by anyone else but herself. She really wasn’t just following my world into oblivion. Much.

Reality cooled and turned to ice – a sprinkling of snowflakes hit our cheeks as we walked back to The Inn. It turned icy financially way as well -- I was running out of money.

I was going through my \$5,000 too fast. I was trying to preserve it like a canteen of water during a marathon race through the Mohave desert.

And believe me, if you haven’t been to the Mohave desert, do yourself a big fat fucking favor and don’t go.

Meanwhile. Money is the cultural totem that affects bums and dreamers alike. It’s the weathervane of reality. It’s a matter of life and death. Power and weakness. SO that issue wasn’t going away just because I was in love.

Another thing one had to consider. Was I just playing the part of the serpent in the allegory of Adam and Eve? Tempting Ruth with knowledge and freedom while possessing neither myself? Was Eric, Adam? What if I was tearing her away from the one she should have been with just so I could have her for myself for as long as possible with no idea why? Admittedly, none of this actually crossed my mind at the time.

Chapter 13

The Inn was an interesting unintentional metaphor, because it's where we got "inside" our heads and inside our relationship on every level. But on the third day we began to feel aimless, hanging out with the fire going in the small room. Not aimless enough to watch TV, but close to that feeling. So we started playing cards. Gin, black jack, poker. Her parents had taught her well.

"So tell me about Eric. . . . When you kissed, was it as good as our kiss was in Paris that first night in front of the garden?"

"I have no idea."

"Why not?"

"Because we never kissed."

"But you said"

"No, *you* said, 'Him?' And I said, 'Yes.' But all I meant is, yes, we went on a date the night before, and yes I liked him, and yes I knew he was into me and I didn't know where it might lead eventually, so if you hadn't dragged your sorry ass into the library I would have gone out with him again."

"So what is *he* going to do once he gets out of the pen?"

"Actually, he wants to be an engineer."

"An engineer? Like a choo choo engineer?" I joked.

"Yes, right, he wants to be the conductor of "The Little Train That Could," and work his way up."

"Nice."

"Actually, he wants to be an electrical engineer, since you must know."

I nodded seriously. "Electric trains."

"Or an industrial. . . . engineer. *Something like that.* . . . I really wasn't listening to what he was saying, you know?" She laughed hard. I was making her feel a bit goofy.

"He'd be better off working on a train than he would be working for some big company on the stock exchange," I said.

"Okay, Mr. Carl Marx, Jr., like you know." She pushed my nose in my own BS.

“I hope I made the right decision!” she said, shaking her head. I started to sound out of touch to her.

“You did for now,” I chimed back sarcastically. We were euphoric. I was just so funny, wasn’t I? Too bad my joke was so prophetic.

Chapter 14

When we woke up the next morning it was a Sunday, I recall. The sun was blazing through the window of The Inn. This was the last day of rest for us. I could no longer afford to rent the room. Reality was coming down the track from somewhere east of Eden, with its little white headlight shimmering in the distance.

“Let me treat you to breakfast again this morning, Mayor. Because . . . well. . . I have something to tell you. And you might not be that hungry after I tell you. So it’s not going to cost me that much.”

I couldn’t read her. “What is it? Tell me now.” She’s in love with Eric, after all. It’s over.

“I need to go back. . . to school. I need to make up for the classes I missed last week, and I need to be a student for the next four years. I know that’s not your dream, not a part of your world, but it’s mine, I’m sure of it now. That reality ultimately may not work for me and you in the long run. But it’s the only thing that feels right to me. I can’t see any other way. . . .”

I sighed. Closed my eyes. “I understand.”

My life was a mess. A shambles. A train wreck. The little train that couldn’t. I couldn’t decide on what do with my life, I couldn’t feel all that much even after she told me the inevitable, I couldn’t think about anything. My perpetual state. So, yeah, I understood. She had a life here, she set up something fine for herself. It worked for her. But going to college was never going to work for me That was my truth.

“Stay with me?” she said.

“Really? But how would that work? All I can imagine doing is sitting around all day waiting for you to get out of class so I can take up all your time.”

She said nothing to this. She must have been thinking – how would I study at night? How could I be a good student and a muse at the same time?

“Look, Ruthy, here’s the truth -- I am a scam. I am not here or there. I have nothing real to give, I have no plan. Staying here waiting for you to come home from class every night makes zero sense for either of us, you know that.”

Impasse. No way out.

“Or, come to Paris with me!” I shouted, like a light bulb going off in my head.

“Didn’t you hear me, Mayor? I have to go back. I love you! I do! But all the travelling and eating and sex and music and dancing and talking in circles about what if this and what if that, *it’s*

tiring, ya know? I need a life with a wheel to steer in some direction. I'm sorry, but that's just me."

"Will you go back to Eric when I leave? I can't tell you not to if I'm leaving, for God's sake!"

She dropped down wearily onto the bed.

Then she said: "Okay, I have an idea. It's not Paris, but it's about us."

"Shoot." I was hoping for a miracle. Miracles sometimes seem like nothing at the time. But I didn't know that then.

"I don't need to see anyone right now. Not even you. I really need to study! I need to catch up with all the work I've missed and really put my mind to it. It's not going to be easy. And it's going to take up almost all of my time if I really want to do my best. So, what if I made a promise to you, and you made a promise to me?"

"Like what?" My heart was racing, I felt like crying, but I didn't. I never cried. Everything was held tightly inside, spinning around like a butterfly in a blender.

"Okay, it's mid-September. Why don't you take some time for yourself, see if you can find out what you want to do with your life, and how I might fit in. Promise me you won't go out with anyone until after Christmas break. I'll promise you the same. Let's not contact each other for those six weeks. Let's give each other some serious space to re-think everything, no more surprise visits. If you come to me just before Christmas break with a plan that makes sense, and you can figure out a way we can be together that has even a speck of reality attached to it, then I'll be here to listen. But it has to include me staying here and letting me graduate. That's what I want for myself. And. . . if you don't show up before the break, then I'll know when I go back to see my parents that you're somewhere out there, doing your thing, and I'll love you from here, from the memory of this moment. But we'll never be again."

She took a breath, her eyes moistened, glistened, I'd never seen here weepy, "Because we have to find a way to connect that's more than this, Mayor, more than this beautiful time we've given to each other. If you don't come back, and, and I. . . ." She started crying.

I loved her, but who knew what the hell that word really meant anyway? I was completely lost. But her idea made as much sense as anything could have that morning. "Okay," I said. "I'll try to get myself together, I swear, and I'll figure things out. And . . . look at me. . . ."

Her eyes were filled with tears, streaks of love running down her cheeks, melting me. I said, "I'll see you just before Christmas. I will. You'll see."

And I hoped to hell I wasn't telling the biggest damn lie of my life.

Chapter 15

“Hello, Dad.”

“Hey boy! How’s life as a vagabond treating you? Are you done yet, please?”

“Ah, I guess not quite yet, but I’m getting there.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m still searching for what I want, dad, but I think I’m making progress.” I felt like I was on a job interview.

“Did your time with Ruth work out?”

“Sort of.”

“Well aren’t you a mystery man. Do you want to talk to me in plain English, or not?”

My dad was a good man. Worked hard as a stock broker, made people a lot of money in bull markets, lost it all back in bear markets. And now, for that, he had become a senior vice president of Merrill. One of millions of senior VPs. But he had a good heart. He lived and died with his clients’ successes and failures. He cared about everyone. Which was more than I could say about myself.

“Where are you?”

“Still in Connecticut. But I’ll be leaving today. I want to come home for a week or two before. . .” my voice trailed off.

“Before what?”

“I’ll tell you when I’m home.”

“You’ll tell me now.”

“Okay, dad, I, I need to go back to Paris for a while. I need to start back there again and rewind. . .”

“*What?*”

“I just need some time to get my head straight. I think I’m supposed to go back there. I felt something different there, about myself, and life, and. . .”

“You met Ruth there, Mayo! Remember? And you stayed in a nice hotel, and ate in four star restaurants on our dime. That’s what was different there! I’d go back there too if I could repeat that kind of experience. But I can’t. And you can’t!”

I was silent. He was confusing me like only he could.

“Maybe it was just an impulsive thought,” I added weakly.

This is what I thought he’d say next:

“IMPULSIVE THOUGHT? THE VERY FIRST IMPULSIVE THOUGHT IN YOUR LIFE, I SUPPOSE? LOOK YOU LITTLE RUNT, THE ENTIRE MESS YOU CALL BEING ALIVE HAS BEEN ONE STUPID ASSED IMPULSIVE THOUGHT AFTER ANOTHER. AND IF YOU’RE ABOUT TO ASK ME FOR MONEY I’M NOT ABOUT TO LET YOU PICK MY POCKET ANY MORE. NOW GET A JOB AS A MECHANIC OR SOMETHING LIKE EVERY OTHER GOOD UPSTANDING COLLEGE DROP OUT. OR COME HOME WHERE YOU WON’T COST ME ANYTHING BUT ROOM AND BOARD AND SIT IN YOUR ROOM AND SPACE OUT UNDERNEATH YOUR HEADPHONES AND PUNCH AWAY AT YOUR REMOTE ALL DAY WHERE YOU’RE SAFE FROM HARM’S WAY. MORONS TEND TO GET HURT OUT THERE IN THE REAL WORLD.”

But he didn’t say that at all.

He mumbled something, as if thinking out loud, weighing the right thing to say and do.

“Look, boy, there are a lot of things I wish I did before I went off to college and got sucked into the game. I was a hippie, after all. And I understand what you’re after. I do. I just don’t want to see you waste your life away wandering around in circles.”

More silence. I knew he was leading to something.

“Why don’t you try Berkeley, Mayor. At lease give it a try! Maybe it’s not too late. . . .”

“It’s too late. . .for me. I don’t want to do that. I’d rather come home, get a job until I make enough money to do what I want, and go where I want, and figure things out from there. I’m eighteen! I don’t see the rush! I’m not ready to surrender.”

He was listening carefully. He was good at listening. It was a big part of his work. “I think I’m an idiot for saying this,” he said, “but I *know* you. I know you. And I trust you to find your way eventually. You’re a good kid, a smart kid. You’re right. Time is on your side.”

I was so grateful to hear those words. When a father really gets who you are, nothing can replace that.

“I’ll loan you the money to go back to Paris for a while if you think that will help,” he blurted out. “Two weeks! *That’s it*. After that, the deal is, you’ll strongly consider re-applying to Berkeley for the winter semester, if they’ll have you. Deal?”

He loved making deals. That’s what he did all day long.

“Okay. Deal.”

“Fine. Two weeks! That’s it.”

“Thanks dad, thanks so much.”

“Mmm,” he grunted. He wasn’t sure he’d made the right decision.

“Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you kind of a personal question?”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I just need to know. . . .Are you happy with your life?”

He laughed. I could imagine him shaking his head. “Yes, Mayor, I’m happy.”

“How? *Why*? Isn’t work . . .?”

“Work’s okay. Not great.”

“But you spend all your time doing it.”

“Too much time, I agree. But I still love life. . . .I love your mom. I love you, and Darcy. She’s turning into a very special young lady. I’m at peace. I have a wonderful family. I believe in life. You hear what I’m saying?”

“Yeah. . . .”

I sensed another lecture coming on. When he started on a “life lessons” talk his voice deepened and his words got more formal.

Then he added, “I don’t like all of my life all the time, Mayor. No one does. But I like my life most of the time, and you know what? *You know what?*”

He was repeating the question for drama. Here comes the spin line. I braced myself.

“*That’s as good as it gets!* Okay? That’s as good as it can ever be.”

I knew he wasn’t done.

“You’re searching for something perfect, Mayor, something that will last forever. One perfect endless shining moment that never dies. But that’s a fairytale! Just a fairytale, okay? Not real. Not true. Not possible.”

He could be very persuasive sometimes.

“But life can be good anyway, even without the fairytales, worth living, if you work at it. If you dedicate yourself to it. But you can’t be flying off to Paris every time something goes wrong. Even if you could afford it, that’s just not going to satisfy you in the long run. After a while it will stop meaning anything to you. It won’t be special. It will just be another escape. Even random improvised experiences, even travelling around the world, free as a bird, can get boring, and lonely! Because there’s more to life than all that.”

“What? Be specific! What’s “more?” I yelled this at him. I wasn’t so much defiant as screaming for the truth. Did he actually know the truth?

“It comes down to connection, not spending your time disconnecting. Pulling the plugs from everything is only a beginning, not a way to live. Connection can be what you make it. But what I’ve seen is that meaning comes from a connection to all the old fashion things your generation -- like my generation when I was your age -- can’t accept. Even though we’ve been trying to connect you to all these things since the day you were born, you just can’t buy it. You have to understand it first! For many years of your life you were connected, right there with us. But then you become a teenager and everything has to get unwound when you’re that age – I remember! - - so you can wind it all back together in your own way. *I understand that*. But if you go down that road for too long, well, there’s a fine line between a seeker of truth and wisdom and a bum floating around without a clue. A fine line between an adventurer and a bum! Or a rebel and a madman. Just like there’s a fine line between a rich man and a beggar -- because regardless of how much money a rich man has if he’s a greedy man he still thinks like a beggar! Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Very clever. I think he’d been working on that line for a while.

“What do you feel connected to, exactly, dad?”

“I have a connection to real love. And to God, in my own way. I may not be religious but I consider myself a spiritual person. I have a connection to our country. To the world, even. But you can only understand the value of connections through a sense of appreciation -- you have to understand how bad life can get without those connections before you can appreciate”

“Appreciate what, exactly?”

“Appreciate having a roof over your head! And someone to love you -- not just someone to love you when you’re on your best behavior, or on a date, or when you’re kind, or clever, or when your high and you say funny things, and run down to the beach at midnight and make an ass of yourself. But finding someone to love the ‘day to day’ you, that’s special. That’s worth it. Someone to love the you that’s going to be hanging around most hours of every day just being normal and boring. Not a superman. Not a perfect man. Not a hero all the time. When you find

that person, and you feel the same way about her, then you get it! And it's not settling for anything, Mayor, it's accepting what it is to be tender and human. You can have dreams and follow them but then you need to accept what is, what the world has to offer and what it doesn't, and get on with it. And. . . “

“Okay, thanks,” I whispered. Too much to intake. Too many words. Too much that didn't connect up with my present experiences. I was heart deaf. Soul blind. Mind numb. I'd have to re-read the transcript some day over a glass of booze. Because at eighteen, all I wanted to do was fuck Ruthy, and if I couldn't do that, then GO TO PARIS! I am not going to lie to you. That's as far as it went at that point in time.

But also it did cross my mind, made me wonder, could Ruthy love me like that? Like my mom loved my father? Or was she trying to tell me, look Mayor, Act I was good, but now you have to come up with an Act II that's even better. Perform for me. Become something brilliant! Playing cards with you with the fire roaring away on a snowy night is JUST NOT ENOUGH!

“Look, come home, stay for a few weeks,” my dad said into the silent phone. “And if you still want to go to Paris I'll help you go. But I need you to find whatever your searching for some time before you run through my entire estate, okay?”

I laughed even though I tried not to. “Okay dad, I'll see you tomorrow night, I think. I'm coming home on stand by. . . .”

Then an urgent thought came. It felt important to me: “Hey, dad?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I say hi to Darcy? I kind of miss her.”

“Darcy? Really? Sure, hold on!” He was very happy about this. He loved it when we got along well. It gave him a sense of pride.

There was some walking around, the sound of feet running quickly up the stairs, a knock on the door of the pink room across the hall. Mumbles, some silent moments going by.

“Hey you!”

“Hi, Darce! How's my baby sister?”

“Fine!” she chimed. She seemed very excited I wanted to touch in.

“How are *you*? Did things work out with Ruthy?”

“Kind of.”

“Oh?”

Darcy read between the lines, smart for someone who had just turned sixteen, and decided not to push to much further. “Hey, I got my beginner’s license and I’m driving around in mom’s car during daylight hours!”

“Hey, welcome to the world of faster wheels! You’ve graduated from bicycle hell!”

“I still love to ride my bike. But, yeah, it’s fun. So are you coming home sometime?”

“Actually, tomorrow, I think.”

“Really, wow! Because. . . .” she stopped mid-sentence.

“Cause why?”

“Well, because I’ve missed you. You’re like my hero!”

“Oh God, Darcy, don’t say that! I’m not a hero, not to anybody. Look to someone the next rung up, like a guy who didn’t pay his parking tickets.”

She laughed that sweet innocent laugh of hers, quiet, full and cheery, with a soft breath at the end of it. “You’re my fav. I can’t wait to see you, Mayo. Can I drive you to lunch or something one day?”

“Absolutely! That would be great. Just don’t wreck the car before I get there!”

“Roger that,” she said. I imagined her saluting like she used to do. Not a speck of defensiveness. No snide comeback like, “Well at least I don’t drive stark raving drunk at four a.m.” She would *never* say that. She was too cool. She loved me too much. I looked forward to spending some one on one time with her.

I got my wish. In spades.

Chapter 16

On this, my second solo air flight ever, the earth shrank quickly below me, and my life became small and still, floating thru marshmallow clouds. A perfect time for reverie. I tool off my i-Pod headphones and leaned back in my seat with my eyes closed.

My father's words began to sink in a bit, but with a twist. I knew how dead life could be with the work, marriage, kids, grandkids formula I so eloquently freaked out Ruthy with. But. . . what if everything I presently wanted came true? What if I go to Paris, I have a great time by myself, I find out what I want to do for the rest of my life – open a French café? Invent cool new phone apps? . . . I rush back to Connecticut, I whisk Ruthy away because, yes, she's changed her mind and only wants to follow me wherever I go. 'Take me on an adventure,' she says smiling, as a big rainbow appears in the western sky. We sail into the open seas. we make love in every imaginable place until we exhaust all the lust, the wanderlust, the anger, the curiosity, the passion, the wildness of the world, and we are left breathless and empty on some sunny beach in the South Pacific with girls in grass skirts asking us if we want another Pina Colada. And here's the point, drum roll please: I would be left right here, the same as I am now, not knowing what the crap any of this was for, or why I should care, or what I should do tomorrow. OMG!

I started talking to myself like some kind of psychotic.

ME: So my mind is an endless vast expanse of meaninglessness, and unless that changes everything leads to nothing. Is that what has ruled me all this time? Dead illusions? Nothingness? I am The Jester of Darkness!

ME: About right. Because, look, everyone gets it but you. You're so disconnected from everything.

ME: Permanent darkness after a solitary flicker of light? Is that what life and death is about. Is that what love is about?

ME: You could see it that way. . . .

ME: And if so, why not just die and get it over with? Get to the finish line before it gets me?

ME: Fine. But you're not man enough to pull the trigger.

ME: You're questioning the manhood of a psychotic? That's fucking smart.

ME: You want answers instead? From me?

ME: If you have anything to say.

ME: Not to you.

ME: Fuck you!

ME: Fuck you too!

It was a very weird flight home.

Chapter 17

When I got to the house, the same house I grew up in a mile from Venice Beach, there was a single light on. Oddly, the garage was open with no cars nestled inside. Mom and dad gone, separately? Darcy can't drive at night yet. . . .

My neighbor greeted me at the door. "Mayor, I've been expecting you."

"Hi Doug . . . Mr. Greenway."

His long wrinkled face darkened. "Mayor, there was an accident this afternoon."

"What?"

"It's Darcy."

"No. What? Is she okay???" I was sent into immediate shock. I had just come from ten hours of travel to get here and landed into a potential nightmare.

"I don't know, son. Borrow my car. Here are map quest directions I printed out to the hospital. I don't know anymore than I've told you. Your mom and dad are expecting you. You need to go now."

I hopped into his 1999 Beemer and blazed off. I was near tears. Starting to hyperventilate, driving too fast. What if . . . don't go there. I tried cell phoning my dad and then my mom. No answer. Not a good sign. I pressed harder on the accelerator. My mind could think of nothing else but exits and stop lights and the double yellow lines before me. They were the enemy. I raced time to my destination.

When I blasted through the glass doors and got to the reception desk everything smelled disgustingly antiseptic. Overhead fluorescents were bare bulb bright. I was a bit jet lagged from the flight, my eyes were blurring a bit, but then again, that might have been me holding back tears. "Not Darcy." That's all I could think, all I could say to myself.

"Darcy Allston's room please."

"And you are?"

"Her brother." I didn't say my first name, it was the cause of too many strange looks and unnecessary conversations – 'I'm Mayor Allston.' 'Mayor who?' Side look. "You're not a Mayor." Right. But. . . Gag line. On and on.

"The nurse was ruffling through a stack of papers. So many sick people. Names upon names. "I'm sorry sir, she's in intensive care."

"I need to see her right now! I just flew in from Connecticut . . ."

“If you just take a seat right over there someone will be with you in a minute.”

And then someone never comes. Yeah, that summed up this life just about perfectly. I wasn't about to do the good soldier thing, this was Darcy! I pretended to take a seat then took off down the hall as soon as the nurse-receptionist turned her back, asking the first guy in a green lab coat where the Intensive Care Unit was. I was just there, and lost my way getting coffee. Oh yes, uh, down this hallway and then two left, and a right.

I ran down the corridors, past thick doors with small windows -- signs for Kidney Dialysis, and MRI scans. So many sick people.

I finally arrived at a door that said, “ICU.” I looked in. Saw a figure that looked a bit like my dad walking across the room. I pressed a buzzer.

“Yes,” said a nurse behind the window.

By now I had no more cool left. “Let me in! My sister's in there! Open the door!”

“Sir, you'll have to”

The door opened. My dad pulled me inside, putting his finger to his mouth to signal for quiet.

“What's going on, dad? How is she?”

“It's bad, son.”

“Oh no, no, *no*. How bad?”

“We don't know yet. But your mom and I have been here since 11 this morning, what time is it?”

There was a clock right behind him. He was stone cold out of it. “9:30 at night.”

“Okay, look, if you can stay here I'm going to try to force your mom to get out of here for 30 minutes and get some food at the cafeteria and a breath of air.”

“Sure of course.”

I crept silently over to where my mom was sitting, at Darcy's bedside. Both of them were motionless.

My mom started crying, obviously not the first time today, it was like she had no tears left, just a quiet dry sobbing. She stood up wobbly legged and hugged me and wouldn't let go.

My dad pulled her away and insisted she take a break. She pleaded, “I'm a mother. I don't take breaks.” but he was firm. He said, “Sooner or later you need to refuel. Do it now while Mayor is here. He'll stay right with her. She gave in. “Look after my baby,” she said to me, sobbing. “I will, mom.”

They left the room, rag tag, swirling in misery. I sat by Darcy's bed, partitioned off from other injured, sick, some might be dying.

Darcy was sleeping, or in a coma. I couldn't tell. Her right leg was raised slightly, in a cast. Her ankle poked out of the bottom. It was dark blue and black and purple. Some kind of dark blue ice pack covered the other leg, which was swollen twice its normal size. She was hooked up to a machine measuring what I guess was her heartbeat. Her head was wrapped at the forehead in a bandage. Some of her long blonde hair escaped, waterfalling away from the pillow.

Her face was pale, angelic, expressionless. No expression of pain. Mouth slightly open. Almost as if expecting a kiss from God. Deep in sleep.

I remembered her, years past, she and I riding in the wind down the Venice beach bike path at sunrise one Saturday morning before anyone was there to block our way. Ocean spilling loudly onto the beach. Sun rising bright red and orange in the eastern sky, above the fog-smog that tinted the atmosphere. She looked at me as she caught up with me, hair flying behind her, body strong and getting shapely at fourteen. Tan shorts, black Beatles tee-shirt untucked, billowing behind her. Her smile was pure and golden. Her hair long and flying like a wispy flag, a part of her identity since she was a baby, long straight blonde hair, staying golden yellow through the years, and that big pure smile of hers. Her silver spoke wheels spinning madly, gleaming. I tried to leave her in the dust but she used every ounce of energy and power she had to prevent it. Leaning forward, pedaling round and round at some superhuman speed, it seemed. And I couldn't leave her behind. She kept up. I high-fived her at about thirty miles an hour. Then we braked to a stop. And I opened my eyes. And she was here, still and silent before me.

I began to cry, one gasp at first, then silence. Then I caved in and began sobbing uncontrollably. My eyes just rained tears, curling across my face, dropping on the floor.

I leaned forward. "Darce, it's me, Mayor. . . . Sis, listen to me. I'm home now. You owe me lunch, remember? And, hey, remember the bike ride, remember how you kept up with me that day? Remember how you pedaled faster than a pin wheel in a hurricane? Remember that? Well . . . find that strength now, Darce. Use it to get better. You have to fight! Fight for me, okay. Fight to come back to us. . . .Please." I began to cry again. I cried until I was fever hot. I felt headachy and a little dizzy. Then it subsided, like a wave after crashing itself onto shore.

Another image came with my eyes closed now, in a trance, reeling in front of my like some movie, so clear. Thanksgiving dinner at our house. She must have been thirteen. We were just becoming friends. I mean, good friends. We were always civil to each other. Putting up with her was easy to do because she'd do anything I said. And her clutching on to me all the time, wanting to do whatever I did. Go where I was going. Tomboy back then. But by thirteen, we could talk about almost anything together. School, and mom and dad, and a few weird Uncles who were all downstairs at the moment scarfing food, pretending to fit in while stuffing themselves.

Everyone was there tonight. Turkey carved up, wine flowing. But I was in a funk. Just wanted to escape. Take off the stiff clothes I was forced to wear for the occasion. They were all staring at me with a sarcastic smile on their face. “Oh, how handsome you look!” said the aunts almost in unison. But I knew what they were really thinking: “Your parents finally got you to knuckle under and look normal, didn’t they? Learn the lessons of respect and tradition, boy. It’s about time.” I hated them for that.

You noticed how pissed off I was. So you took my hand while they were all screaming over each other, barking out one stupid and trivial thing after another until nothing made any sense, all drunk now, and you snuck me upstairs. You said you had something to show me. Some gift you were going to give me for Christmas but you couldn’t wait. “Here it is,” you said. Your eyes were sparkling with excitement. “Look!” you said. You couldn’t stand it any more. You unwrapped it, reverently but hurriedly, like it was the Holy Grail itself. Handed it to me. It was a glass ball with a beautiful girl standing in front of a castle. You shook it and snow came down, and fell slowly on the entire scene. I stared at it. It was supposed to be stupid for a boy my age to like something like that. Dumb. Child-like at worst. Girl-ish at best. But it got to me, somehow. She knew me too well. The girl in there, under the falling snow. I felt a pang of something odd shoot through me as I stared at the golden haired girl in the globe. Love? Empathy? Wanting to save her . . . I shook it off.

“So?” I said.

“You don’t like it? I can return it for something else. Or, I want to give it to you. Now!”

You held it out to me. Sweet hands cupping the glass. Holding it out to me like an ancient magical thing, and somehow a Genie would pop out to grant me a wish.

“Nah,” I said, transfixed, not blinking. “It’s kinda for girls.”

“Oh, okay.” You shrugged. I knew I hurt your feelings. But you showed not a hint of sadness or anger at me for waving away your gift. You loved me that much, didn’t you?

You put it aside and laughed at something that was stuck to my fancy shirt. A thick streak of gravy. “See, you found a way to be a slob and screw them no matter what they dressed you in!”

“Yeah, cool, they can never get to me.” She nodded.

We started to talk about how much we hated these family events, and how everyone’s breath smelled like wine and cigars, and how gross the turkey looked lying there on it’s back, dead, with its ribs showing now that everyone had gorged their fill of it.

We put on some loud music and listened with our eyes closed until mom and dad came in and dragged us back downstairs. “Don’t be rude, you two.”

I opened my eyes.

“I . . . hey, Darce, hey. I have a secret to tell you.” I leaned closer to her sleeping face. “You don’t tell Chris or Andre though, ever, promise? Okay. Listen, baby sister, this is the truth, I loved the snow globe you gave me. I should have taken it. Remember? I should have recognized what was in there, how it moved me. How you moved me. You know me so well. But I couldn’t let on.”

Suddenly, she opened her eyes just a little! Slits at first, eyes rolling up a little as if she were still deep in sleep. “Mayo?” she whispered.

“Yeah Darce, I’m right here!” I moved the chair closer.

“Where’s mommy?”

Mommy? My God she hadn’t used the word ‘mommy’ since she was five years old.

“She’s here, Darce. Right downstairs. Back any second.”

“I, um, need. . . need some water.” She was parched from the drugs, no doubt.

“Okay, hold on.”

I raced around the partition to the nurse at the desk. “My sister needs water, please.”

“Okay.” She even never looked up at me.

“I mean she just woke up out of her coma and talked to me *and asked for water!*” It was the most miraculous thing that ever happened in my entire life! Didn’t she know that? How could she not care?

“The doctor will be here in a minute.”

“But she’s thirsty now!” I said getting agitated.

She turned to me. “Do you want to stay in here, sir? Because if you do you need to keep your voice down.”

I saw a water fountain in the corner but no cups. I went over and cupped my hand with water from the fountain and rushed back to her.

“Darcy, the doctor will be here in a minute, but here, sip, sip this from my hand.”

I put my hand gently up to her mouth and she suckled it like an infant. Most of it spilled on her white gown. “Mmm,” she moaned. I had never felt anything so physically beautiful in my life, feeling her urgency for staying alive, and me helping her, just me.

She fell back under, breathing easier now. I sighed a huge sigh of relief . . . I had helped her for that one moment, and it meant so much to me, but I knew she was still in extreme physical danger. . . . Would she even remember I was here today?

I sat back and breathed out a long sigh. This time the wildest thing happened. I began to pray. I had never done it. Not since I was six or seven anyway. I had no clue about what was going on “out there,” beyond the night sky. Didn’t trust the priests and the church, or the California gurus, or the L.A. philosopher author neighbors, or any of the self help books I browsed through at the airport news stands. They all seemed to know something I didn’t, but I couldn’t follow their path because I couldn’t truly be sure what they said was true. Either that, or somehow I knew that they didn’t know anything! So the only thing I was left with, and truly was comfortable with, was doubt.

I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, my fingers were intertwined and glued together like the time I was hypnotized by a magician at Andre’s sixteenth birthday party. My teeth were clenched, and I whispered loudly to myself, “Please God, whoever or whatever you are, if you have any care at all about this world, if you are real and have any goodness in you, please let Darcy get better. She is who you want here. . . I would do anything. In fact, I would switch places with her in a heartbeat, right now! Go ahead, make it happen! Let her be sitting here praying over me, instead of this. . . let me fight this. She’s too . . .” But then I suddenly realized that if we were switched, she would be asking God to do the same thing. She would ask to switch with me! And maybe that’s what happened. He had listened to her instead of me, and that was supposed to be me lying there, and she had taken my place. I wouldn’t put it past her to pull something like that.

“Look, I am nobody. I’m smaller than a piece of dust trapped in a sun beam compared to the energy you are. . . I know that. But I’m begging you, please. . . Remember when I was five and I asked you to prove yourself to me? I was drying off from a bath in the bathroom next to Darcy’s room and I asked you to just move the toilet paper, rustle it, just a little, since there was no wind in there, it would have to be you! And I begged you to show me, and asked you again and again to do just that one simple thing, to move the toilet paper with some magical isolated wisp of wind, or lift it up, defy gravity, or anything. I sat on the side of the tub and concentrated on it, and I was dedicated to you in that moment, I didn’t even blink, I didn’t blink until my eyes were burning from the windless air, until finally, I gave up. I gave up and never asked again. Remember?”

“Well, this is different now. This is the moment you *have* to come through. This isn’t a whim. Not a game. This is. . . she doesn’t deserve to die. She doesn’t deserve to be lying there like this. You have to help her. After all, if you’re behind all destiny then this is your damn fault!” I started sobbing again. Nothing else happened but tears.

I watched her for a while after the wave broke again. Her breath was irregular. It scared me. I looked at the IV’s and the machine she was hooked up to. Couldn’t make any sense out of the patterns of white lines on the green screen. And I just lost it.

“Why her?” I screamed loud inside my head, so loud my jaws felt like they would break under the pressure. “*Why?* Why choose the best person, with the biggest heart? Don’t you have any

sense of rightness at all? Why would you do this to her and not me, or the millions of bastards out there who have no heart? Why am I allowed to run free, completely ignoring every wondrous thing you do, calling you names, believing in nothing, doing nothing with my life? Why are you letting me spew my venomous crap all over people, and myself, and then taking the best person you've maybe ever made in all of time and cracking her open like an egg? What's WRONG with you? Are you insane? Or maybe all you can do is explode everything into being and then watch, like some clown without a remote, numbed out in front of a huge TV, is that it? You don't make any decisions at all after the initial creation? It's just one big roll of the dice after that? Because if that's the case, I'll forgive you. You know not what you did . . . But if you had anything to do with this, and you just let her die, I swear I'll get you for this. Somehow I will."

The anger burst into complete helplessness and I was crying so loud when the doctor came in he had to forcibly lead me out of the ICU altogether. My mom and dad came back and saw me sitting there, leaning against the wall, hands locked around my legs, looking numb, staring at the floorboard across the corridor.

"Are you okay? Is Darcy. . . ?"

"Same." I choked on the word but knew I had to speak or my mom would have had a heart attack on the spot. "Doc's in there with her." I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my shirt.

They rushed right past me. Crazy kid in the hall. I didn't care if I was invisible to them now. Or if it seemed like I didn't care. It was actually better that way.

I went back in after I composed myself. They tried to get me to leave the ICU around 1 a.m., but I refused. I laid on the cold floor using my coat as a pillow and went to sleep next to her bed.

Chapter 18

A long two days came and went. I was virtually cryogenic. Frozen waiting. Then one morning it happened. She opened her eyes and saw me staring at her. She blinked. “Still here?” she whispered.

I smiled, “Darce?”

“Hey.” Her voice was deep and raspy. “Hey, what, what are you doing here?” She suddenly seemed disoriented, like she couldn’t figure anything out.

“Somebody hit you on the freeway. Ran right over the yellow divider. Drunk.”

She nodded. “Oh yeah,” she whispered, breathing a deep breath out. “I remember . . . I tried to move into the other lane but there was another car there and I didn’t want to. . . .” she tried to swallow but coughed instead, “didn’t want to hit anybody, so I,” her voice trailed off.

Then she swallowed again, “Mayo, thank you.” She tried to reach out to me but the muscles in her hand and arm couldn’t quite make it. But I could tell. So I put my hand on hers. Her hand was icy cold, digits frozen there in place.

“For what?”

“For praying for me.”

I looked at her incredulously, “How did you know?”

“I heard you. I heard what you said. And you know what? It helped me. I pedaled my bike so hard to get better, you know? To get back to you.”

I was stunned. Had I been talking out loud the entire time?

I looked at her IV. “Does that thing hurt?”

She rolled her eyes. “Nothing hurts. Everything hurts.” She tried to smile but the muscles around her mouth didn’t quite go there.

“Darcy, I’ve made a decision, while sitting here next to you these three days. . . . You know what?”

She looked at me peacefully.

“I’m going to stay home with you for the next few months and take care of you. I’m going to be your physical therapist, loyal slave, entertainment guide, DJ, and basically do anything you want me to do. I’ll even listen to some of your girl pop music.”

She coughed and shook uncomfortably. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“Sorry.”

I brushed my hand over her fingers. I massaged them gently. “Listen. I was going to go somewhere. To get my head together, again. You know? Again, and again? That’s me lately. But guess what? You woke me up. You are my somewhere. I just want to get you better and spend time with you.”

“Yay,” she said weakly. That’s all she could say. But I could tell the thought of having me around was cheering her up.

“Listen, I’m going to let you sleep, but tell me one thing. Just one thing. This is kind of crazy, but the doctor said you almost died on that first day. So, like, did you sense anything at all when you were out there at the edge . . .? Or, was it all just darkness?”

“It was way better there than feeling all this pain!” she smiled. “But, no, it wasn’t darkness at all. Something else.”

“Something else?”

She nodded, “Something, don’t know what.”

I was quiet. Then she fell back asleep.

“She’s not out of the woods yet,” cautioned the doctor. He had been standing right behind me for I don’t know for how long. “But you’re doing good work with her.”

I was embarrassed, but I thanked him. Then I fell back into the chair next to her bed and crashed until my parents came back from lunch or dinner. Time was all a mess. I hadn’t even looked out a window in days.

Chapter 19

Two weeks later Darcy was allowed to go home. We were all going home together.

I remember hitting the air, the sunlight, sparkling like an electric diamond, searing right through my eyes. I remember her trepidation about getting in the car. How would she navigate her still broken body into the back seat. And then not be scared when we drove on the freeway towards home. I remember holding her hand all the way. She kept her eyes closed the entire time.

She whispered to me during the drive that I'd made a big difference by staying there with her, talking to her every day whether she was completely out of it or not, believing that she would get better. . . . But one of the things that happened back in the hospital changed my life, not hers.

I was sitting by her bed. She had become much more lively and responsive in that last week. So I began to talk about Ruth, and the pact we'd made. She listened but didn't say much. Then, not atypically, all the energy suddenly went out of her and I could tell she was about to go back to sleep. She grabbed my hand and whispered, “. . . Love you, Mayo.”

“That's your territory. I have no idea what that means,” I whispered back.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me what you mean!” She focused back into the present again.

“I mean, mom and dad are great, but. . . I don't know. . . if I really cared that much about Ruthy you'd think I would figure out some way to work things out. Get a job and just marry her or something. So, basically I suck. . . . But you, Darce, *you* feel love all the time! For everyone. It's a part of your nature. It's in your face when you're asleep. Honestly. It's so easy for you. You say to me, 'love you, Mayo,' but what does that really mean? I have no clue.”

I thought I was blabbing too long and she had already begun falling back asleep. But she hadn't, she'd continued listening to every word.

“Are you asking me what 'I love you' means?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess it means . . . whatever happens to you . . . whenever you hear. . . the sound of those words.”

I didn't respond right away. I let her fall back asleep.

When I heard the sound of the words “I love you,” and thought of Darcy, all the lights came on in me. Just like they did with Ruthy, most of the time. When I thought of the words with some

other people the lights came on steadily and brightly, but didn't blind me or anything. Some people when they say or hear those words, they mean nothing at all. . . . I had been there too, living in that cold world.

Her eyes opened again a short time later. "I'm really feeling better," she said.

"Well, good! I bet we'll go home soon, and you'll be back to your pink room."

She smiled at the thought.

"Wanna paint your pink room black instead? You could be so Goth."

"Not this year," she laughed.

"Darcy . . . they all expect something from me," I whispered almost to myself. "But I'm just the same as I ever was. Not much good with fulfilling anyone's expectations."

She knew what I was talking about.

The accident, as fate would have it, deepened her. She had a natural wisdom now that used to just be kindness. It had grown through pain.

So after looking at me for a what seemed like a long time she said, "Mayor. *You*. . . you have always made me laugh and cry and inspired me. . . *with your words*. You have a unique way of seeing the world. Did you know that?"

"No!"

"Well it's true. I think you should write about the things you think about. Write about everything from the beginning. Not the chronological beginning. *Your* beginning. Write about life as you know it – as you see it. Just start where you need to start and forget about time. Because" It's as if the words froze in the air.

". . . . What Darce?"

"Let me tell you what I know for sure after where I've been. You asked me what I saw at the edge of life. Here is what I saw: Time is a fairytale. And anyone who fears it, or depends on it, or lives by it too strictly, well, they'll never really get to live."

I nodded, only partially understanding. Wanting to hear more.

"That world in you. See where it leads you."

I stared at her, lying there, still wired up and slightly drugged. Was she hallucinating? Was I a writer?"

“See that journal over there?” She pointed to the night stand next to a vase of flowers and a glass of water. “Pick it up.”

It was a blue book, all empty pages – I started to hand it to her, but she waved me off.

“No, no. Mom gave that to me yesterday. It’s blank. It’s yours. Take it. . .Find out.”

“No, I don’t know if. . . .”

“Hey, you owe me. . .you didn’t take the snow globe, right . . . ? Take this.”

For a second I thought she’d become delirious again, which had happened on some of the worst nights I was with her.

“The Thanksgiving snow globe,” she continued. “You turned it down. You wouldn’t take it.”

I closed my eyes. Had she heard what I said that first night?

“Don’t turn this gift down. Just try it.”

“Okay, okay.”

She sighed a huge shaky sigh, moaned under her breath, and squiggled around slowly trying to get her body more comfortable.

“Give it to me for a second please, and pass me the pen, it’s there near the flowers.”

She took the book and the pen from me, with great effort, since it felt heavy to hold in her hands, and on the front page she wrote in big shaky letters:

“TO SOMEWHERE BEAUTIFUL.”

She smiled, then closed her eyes. Her breathing leveled out.

She’d stayed awake just long enough to change everything.

Chapter 20

I stayed with Darcy and my parents all the way through Thanksgiving. I promised Darcy I would not leave her until she could ride her bike with me on the bike path at Venice Beach. Hopefully, she would be healthy enough to make that ride before the New Year.

As the time moved closer towards Christmas I thought about Ruth every day. Something exciting was crystallizing.

My parents saw a change in me. It gave me hope that maybe Ruth would too. My mom remarked to me one day, “You’ve grown a lot in the last few weeks.”

“Why do you say that?”

She raised her eyebrows, “You care.” That’s all she said.

I wrote in the blue journal every day. When I finished the last page I continued to write on my lap top. I had a plan. Crazy-assed as it was.

Thanksgiving was typically insane. Everyone was so happy that Darcy was alive, and not going to be a cripple for the rest of her life, that all the neighbors as well as our nutty weird Uncles and Aunts, and all of our other relatives from out of town were coming. Three turkeys, five bowls of mashed potatoes, people everywhere, in every room in the house. Uncle Rusty dares to sing. It was awful. Again, I found myself after dinner in Darcy’s room, hiding away from the madness, peaceful there, with the sanest person I knew.

A week before Christmas Darcy asked me to get the bikes out. It was time. She’d been walking since early November, working with a physical therapist who was stunned at her progress, and running every day at the gym since early December. Getting back in shape after months of healing multiple broken bones, working her way back from the unbearable pain.

We oiled the gears and put on our helmets.

Down the driveway we flew.

“Hey!” my mom called. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Darcy waved back, “See ya!”

I can only imagine the joy and trepidation mom felt as we whirled away.

Chapter 21

And the time whirled away as well. It was time to go.

I hugged Darcy goodbye. Before I left I told her, “Look, I’m not trying to mess with you, okay, because I’m your brother. But I just want to say that you are so beautiful, through and through. You’re an angel, actually. So when some boy comes along and tells you he think he knows you, and thinks he knows what you want, and you start to fall for him, remember this one thing -- ask yourself, ‘Does he treat me as good as my big brother treats me? Does he love me that much?’ Because if the answer is no, he’s not the one. Got it? He’s just another lame dude who doesn’t have a clue how to match how cool you are.”

“Mmm, hmm,” he eyes filled with tears. “Roger that.” She gave me her mock salute.

I took a quick look around the house, gave everyone a quick hug goodbye, and was away, off to the cold mysterious plains of Connecticut. I would get to Wesleyan two days before Christmas break. Fate would lead the way.

Chapter 22

My third solo flight was not so good, truth be told. Because I really thought that by the time I saw Ruth she would barely even remember my name. So much had happened in the nearly two months since we'd last seen each other. Not a word was spoken between us. She could be living with Eric by now. . . .But I kept my eyes locked on my lap top. My fingers tapped away, not once stopping to look back at what I'd written. I just kept tapping, tapping, until both batteries were dead. We landed in a snow storm. Merry Christmas, east coast.

The trees were barren now. No more rainbow leaves. No color anywhere. Just outstretched branches looking dead and frozen in a state of pleading.

The campus was bustling but everyone seemed pretty nervous. Finals. Nights awake, No Doze, large coffees to go. Pizzas delivered to the dorm rooms for dinner.

I sat on a cold unwelcoming iron bench in front of the reception desk just inside the dorm where Ruth dwelled, waiting for her to come back from whatever class she had. I was freezing cold. Some of that chill was because I was nervous as hell. I felt like curling up in a big fetal ball to keep warm, and keep from flying off into space, wailing in some crazy made up language, like the face in Van Gough's "The Scream." That about visually sums up what was inside me.

Every time the big glass door opened with girls covered head to toe with coats and hats and mittens I sat up straight, in case one of them was her. When the hall was empty again I fell back into "The Scream" state, hands hugging my knees together.

Then she appeared, preceded by some telepathic flash -- I knew a second before the door opened this was the moment, but I didn't have time to think about how strange it was that I knew. I stood up a moment before she entered so she could see me.

Anything could have happened then, like her being totally startled by my presence and saying:

1. "Oh. . . .hi. Wow. I didn't expect you to be here. . . .Um. . . ."
2. "Hello, Mayor. Wow, you remembered. Cool. Really cool. But, well. . . ."
3. "Oh, Mayor. Hi. Um, this is Eric. Remember Eric? . . .Eric, Mayor!"
4. "Damn, why did you have to be here. You're still out to spoil everything in my life, aren't you?"
5. "Mayor? Wow! Um, listen, I have something important to say: *GET OUT!*"

She smiled at me calmly. Her eyebrows lifted slightly in what looked to be a sympathetic response, "Hi you! Hi!!! *I knew you'd come!*" She hugged me until I stumbled and almost fell backwards. Both of our clumsy thick coats combined to create a one foot barrier between us. I was going to try to kiss her hello but there was too much distance, like trying to kiss a pregnant woman over her big stomach. "Oh, wow, I'm a bit teary, um. Sorry. I just can't believe you're here. But I knew you'd come, I did. . . . I missed you so much!"

Okay, this was better than 1-5. But what was I feeling? I couldn't feel much of anything, really, I was so cold. And I was so prepared for the worst I couldn't take in all the surety she had.

"What unreal timing," she said, out of breath, "I just finished my last final. Did you know that? How could you have known that?"

"Well, I got a job as a psychic at the San Francisco Thanksgiving Fair and they taught me a lot."

"Uh huh, weirdo. So you then you must know everything else that's going on with me?"

I tensed up. "Not a clue." Weak smile. Begging her to cut the rope I was hanging from.

"I thought not. Well, we can't go upstairs. Roommates. Where should we go?"

"I booked The Inn." It felt too forward. "But we could maybe go to the café?"

"Okay, let me go upstairs for a few minutes. I'll be right back." She didn't kiss me as she slid into the open elevator.

A part of me still demanded that I brace myself. Be ready for anything, especially, "The Bomb."

"The Bomb" was something I had experienced all too often. Just when you're a moment from victory someone lands a fifty footer at the buzzer. And there is jumping and screaming and shock, and the other team is going wild, a moment they'll never forget. And neither will you. . . . My second girlfriend, who I was delusional enough to think I liked, suddenly was dating the kid in my school I hated the most. Swish, nothing but net. . . . Or you're about to go to Paris and you find out there's been a car crash, and someone you love is dying. And the fallout is radioactive. So I have to stay on my guard. Watching the empty skies, listening carefully for the hum of enemy planes.

Ruthy came bounding out of the elevator, grabbed my hand on the run and raced me outside into the snow. We walked down High Street, with the sun still radiating a few final sparks of dim sunlight from its corner of the sky. Ruth stopped to pick up enough snow to make a snowball. She played with it and packed it nice and round as we walked. Then suddenly she threw it high up in the air with both hands. It came down and hit me squarely on the top of the head.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" She giggled.

"Lucky shot."

"No way, I've been practicing with Muggsy Bogues for six weeks!"

Hopefully, that blast to the head was the last bomb of the evening. Wouldn't that be nice?

Away we spun down the street feeling almost suspended in time. Life was ablaze, pulsing there right in front of our eyes. We were filled of the thrill and fear of the unknown.

I was about to make a left towards the café. But she tugged at me to make a right towards The Inn. The air got frostier as the sun disappeared below the city buildings. We reached The Inn, walked up the red carpeted steps and came to the old room, our room 4.

She unbuttoned her big thick black coat, which looked kind of terrible on her. But find me any kind of pretty winter coat. I mean, they make everyone basically look like a bear.

She had on a soft yellow sweater, with a purple undershirt sticking out just a lick above the neckline. Ear rings, little green ones, fake emeralds I supposed. Nice touch. Chic yet cheap. Just my style.

“Okay, tell me everything,” she breathed excitedly.

“It’ll take hours and hours, really. Please, you first.”

She looked a little perplexed, maybe even a bit frustrated, but said, “Okay, well, here’s the abridged version, because there isn’t much adventurous to tell – I’ve been studying. The end. Tests were hard, frankly. I hope I did okay on the finals. One of them was wicked. I went back home for Thanksgiving break. Thought about calling you, but didn’t obviously. My parents have mellowed now that they see I’m firmly ensconced in school. They seemed relieved when I told them I wasn’t seeing anyone and just wanted to concentrate on my studies. I should have been wearing big thick glasses and tied my hair in a bun to underscore my point, but they got it anyway. I’m no longer a hopeless trollop in their eyes. Came back here, went back to class. . . .Look, I’m not the story teller among us, ask me what you want to know.”

I nodded. “Were you being honest when you said you weren’t seeing anyone?”

“I haven’t dated anyone since you left, if that’s what you mean. Not Eric either. And I wasn’t literally ‘seeing’ you since you left. So I don’t think I was lying to them, if that’s what you mean. . . .I kept wondering if you’d come. I kept trusting that you would. But really I didn’t know for sure. There was always a chance you were really just a flakeballOr my other better thought was that, somehow”

I let her think her way to it”you would be just a little different, in good ways, I mean. Hoping we both would grow in our separate ways, but still relate.”

She looked at me. “So your turn now.”

“Okay, well first of all, I pretty much stayed in one place.”

“Paris?”

“Didn’t go.”

She looked at me puzzled, “Did you stay home and get a job?”

“No, not exactly. But kind of.”

“What does that mean?”

“I got a lot closer to my sister, actually, because. . . .”

“That’s what you did for almost two whole months? You got closer to your”

“Wait! That’s not what I meant to say.”

“Well, just say it!”

“She almost died.”

“*What?* Darcy?”

I nodded. I wasn’t ready to tell her about what happened to Darcy. I hadn’t talked about it with anyone actually. And didn’t really want to. But Ruthy seemed very concerned, so I told her about how I stayed in the hospital with her, and took care of her once she got back home. I told Ruthy about how great Darcy was through the whole thing. How she had grown so much. And I told her how happy we were when we finally got to ride our bikes together again, although I knew Ruthy couldn’t have understood the full significance of that moment.

Ruth listened the whole time in silence. Then the strangest thing happened.

She reached into the drawer and pulled out the old deck of cards that were still there. Strange. It was almost an afterthought. But it was perfect. We were decompressing. Trying to fill in the background of the painting; but that would have to happen with more detailed strokes now, and without so much effort. And over time. We sat on the bed cross-legged and played gin until it was time for dinner.

The café was quiet this night, since most of the student body was packing up, checking their flights, printing out their boarding tickets. We talked about little things. Teachers she had, good and bad. Interesting classes she took.

I told her about how nice it was, in retrospect, to be in warmer weather during the winter. And that I took long bike rides alone, and played some basketball at the high school courts in short sleeves.

She looked at me and smiled, glad for me. Slowly we were connecting again, not with one wildly dramatic romantic moment, and not by fulfilling each other’s expectations, but simply by being ourselves. We began to realize again what a natural fit we were just hanging out together. She thought I was funny, kind of cool, kind of a lovable oddball. A rebel. But less strange to her in these moments now. Because I wasn’t trying to be cool or strange any more. I wondered if she would be okay with that.

I looked at her face closely from time to time, trying to see her from a new perspective, and thought she was very pretty (which meant more than just sexy.) But I was keeping my distance physically. She seemed more relieved by it than put off. I think she took it as a sign that I was here for her, not just for me.

When it was time for bed she stood in front of the roaring fire in our room and slowly began to take off her clothes. Oddly, I didn't feel much at first. The evening had already been so intense. There was no insane desperate-to-connect feeling. We already had. Everything seemed to be beautifully muted, moving in slow motion. But when we were both undressed and our skin finally touched I was pulled back out into the starry blue ocean -- the lighthouse beacon was strobbing in the sky. I lost the need to connect to any other reality but hers and mine. I cried afterwards -- a new habit I'd apparently picked up. She didn't get freaked out by my tears. She didn't get paranoid about there being something wrong with me or us. She saw through to me, and was kind enough to just let me be.

In the morning we took a walk back to her dorm. Tomorrow she would be flying home. She had packing and cleaning to do.

I spent my time walking around the campus, bundled up in Ruth's winter coat, which was a lot warmer than the one I'd brought. When I stumbled upon the library I was curious to see if it was open. I pulled on the door and it swung back. It was nearly deserted. I could smell the subtle scent of a thousand books permeating the air.

I saw her at that table over there, at the beginning of the school year, with Eric breathing down her neck. So much had happened since. I found myself walking through the isles, looking carefully through the fiction section, leafing through many dozens of novels, seeing with newly opened eyes the amazing gifts that some of these authors possessed. The depth of their craft was revealed to me even by just leafing through pages, in random lines, with sharply defined images, descriptions of a scene that came together like the subtle brush strokes of a painting, a valley, the opening of a rickety wooden door. A man drowning in an ocean of dreams.

I met Ruth back at the dorm at the prescribed time. "All set," she said. "Where'd you go?"

"I met some new friends."

"Who?"

"Well let's see, there was a guy named Ken Kesey, and John Fowles, and another 'John' named Steinbeck. And this really interesting kinda kooky girl named, Ursula LeGuin."

She shook her head, "Yeah, well, she's definitely the best sci-fi writer ever -- The Lathe of Heaven. . . and you're still a weirdo."

She took my hand and began to lead us back to The Inn. It was time for another talk. The one she wanted to have.

On the way we passed the old red brick buildings, the church steeple. A green road sign pointing the way to the town waterfall. My mind seemed clear and ready, with the air so cold and fresh, so I decided not to wait. I didn't want to talk about my big plans in a small room. It seemed like the right moment.

"So, there's a lot left to tell about my 'semester,'" I said. "My hardest semester." I noticed my breath making a cloud of smoke in the frigid air.

She waited for me to continue, but we kept walking.

"To get right to the point, with a very unpoetic lead up, I'm writing a book."

"A book? About what?"

"Actually, about all of this, everything we're walking past, everything I'm thinking and feeling."

"Us?"

"That's some of it, a lot of it really."

"A writer! That fits you, you know, it really does. It makes sense. . . . Can I read it?"

"Not yet. Not until I come to the ending." We were only a block from The Inn now.

I looked at her in an unusually intense way, feeling like this was the moment, the first time I would have said it aloud to anyone: "And then, no matter what happens when I finish, I want to keep writing. Because, well, I think that's what I'm supposed to do."

She came closer and kissed me softly on the lips. We stood still in a whitewashed scene, ice and snowfall and gray air blurring the boundaries.

"And how do we fit in? You and me? Writers need a lot of private time, and lots of experiences and adventures out in the real world," she said as quietly as the snow falling.

"I came here for you. I want to be here. Watch you graduate. I can write from anywhere. I have plenty of ideas. Plenty to say. Summers we'll be free to go a little crazy, which is always a good thing, right? So if you. . . ."

"Yes, yes, that sounds fine. Great!" she smiled and cupped my hands in hers.

She was thinking about saying more but decided not to. I could tell she was thinking about all the details that I never considered. I was a big picture dreamer. She was more practical. So I added, "I'll need work while I write. So before you get all warm and gushy about this I want to put this

in front of your brain -- I may come home one night with a clerk apron on after a long day of cashiering at the local drug store, looking like a dork, with thoughts of dental floss and Pepto-Bismol flying through my head, while you come home from class with a stack of books under your arm. . . .”

“And see if I fucking care,” she interrupted. . . . “You’re my guy!”

We both started nodding, then whooping, jumping, then screaming, running down the street, freaking out all the Christmas shoppers. But they’d get over it.

The scene shifts to the beginning of the winter semester.

We walk towards the library together on a snowy day in early January, the start of the new year.

An image of Darcy’s beautiful girl in the snow globe is transposed over the scene before us. .

..

angel white flakes of snow falling inside and out.

Epilogue

I have no idea what will happen with this book. Before I began writing it, in pen, in the journal Darcy gave to me, a working title had already been written for me on the first page. “To Somewhere Beautiful.” I used to think that the road to somewhere beautiful was a place in time; or an everlasting moment of sensual beauty; a perfect kiss under the stars in a Paris garden. Most of the time, it was always out there, just out of reach. But now I know where it is. And I travel there more often.

If the only people who ever read this book all the way through are Ruth and Darcy, that’s okay. There is something about the permanency of stories – they don’t leave. They don’t die.

That’s not “the real world,” I know. Time drags us through our solitary path. People and love leave us. Death is waiting. But those are no longer reasons to stop trying.

Most people say what I really want is to live my life in a fairytale. They scoff at that. On the other hand, I no longer believe all fairytales are lies. But that’s another story for another time.

The End

- Gary Marks